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Travis Ferrell
Winthrop University Rock Hill, SC

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Claiming the Feminine: Assimilationism and Militantism in Three Lesbian Texts

Keywords
Feminist Theories, Assimilationism, Militantism, Gender Studies, Women Studies
Lesbian Feminism, by its nature highly militant, views assimilation with the larger society not only as self-defeating but also highly dangerous. By internalizing negative beliefs from a heterosexist and patriarchal society, the assimilationist invites herself to believe the negative stereotypes that an oppressive hegemony presents to her. In fact, she becomes an agent that perpetuates these beliefs herself. Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Down the Little Cahaba,” and Lisa Springer’s “Between Girls” all exemplify this disdain for assimilationism in two ways. First, they demonstrate, through either example or counter-example, how an assimilationist position ultimately makes a lesbian an agent of her oppression. Second, all three works are by...
lesbian authors for a lesbian readership. They embody Lesbian Separatism, an extreme militant position highly integrated with Lesbian Feminism that advocates political and social empowerment through separating from both the homophobic heterosexual community and the sexist homosexual male community. Straights and gay men are invited to listen, but they are not the intended audience.

At the heart of every minority response to power inequities, the issue of whether to gain power through assimilationism or through a militant separatism has always been an issue. From the militant camps within the Gay Liberation and Women’s Rights movements of the 1970’s, Lesbian Feminism was born. Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson, editors of *Completely Queer: The Gay & Lesbian Encyclopedia*, explain:

[A]n increasing number of lesbians came to view themselves as marginalized by both heterosexual-dominated feminist groups...and the male-dominated GAY LIBERATION movement. In response, many lesbians confronted heterosexual feminists with protests...and distanced themselves from male-chauvinist gay men to devote themselves to lesbian SEPARISM [sic]. (361)

Lesbian Feminism is sufficiently militant that it is not entirely a part of Gay Liberation, but a reaction to it. As Hogan and Hudson note, Lesbian Separatism is one of the most basic aspects of Lesbian Feminism:

Lesbian SEPARISM [sic]...advocates physical, social, emotional, political, economic, and psychological separation from men and institutions operating for the perpetuation of male privilege...Proponents argue that separatism is a positive goal necessary to examine the nature of oppression apart from the oppressor. (Hogan and Hudson 499)

Separation from groups that support and sustain a patriarchal society includes Gay Liberation.

Compulsory Heterosexuality, Rich’s belief that society forces a lesbian to try to “pass” as a heterosexual woman, is a clear example of Lesbian Separatism as identity politics. Marilyn Kallet and Patricia Clark, editors of *Worlds In Our Words: Contemporary American Women Writers*, note in the introduction preceding Rich’s work: “[T]wo women loving each other in a world that offers violence instead of support...makes loving on a day-to-day basis ‘heroic’” (573). The lesbian couple is a vibrant, empowered example of lesbians resisting an oppressive society. For Rich, simply to acknowledge one’s innate lesbianism is a militant stance. In this view, a lesbian who
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tries to assimilate into the overall culture is a lesbian who has yet to make the break from the heterosexist hegemony that weans lesbians away from their natural sexual desires. The couple in “Twenty-One Love Poems” is victorious over heterosexist misogyny explicitly by claiming their natural attraction despite society’s programming. “[T]wo women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple / two people together is a work heroic in its ordinariness...look at the faces of those who have chosen it” (Rich 573). The choice of the word “chosen” (Rich 573) is primary to an understanding of Rich’s poem. Not only does it demonstrate that a conscious, brave choice must be made to be in a lesbian relationship; it also demonstrates that being “out” is more than just telling your mother. Being a lesbian means choosing to be honest with one’s self about who a lesbian really is.

Lesbian identity is paramount to Lesbian Feminism and a correct reading of “Twenty-One Love Poems.” Bonnie Zimmerman, in her work The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989, asserts that liberation and claiming sexual identity go hand-in-hand:

Why do some women “choose” women and others men? Is sexual orientation a choice at all—or are women subtly coerced into heterosexuality...Given the right circumstances—the right women or the women’s liberation movement—the heterosexual fog lifts and a woman makes the choice to love women (53).

Zimmerman’s belief in this natural attraction and that a heterosexist patriarchal society weans all women away from a primary lesbian attraction is still consistent with Rich’s militant, Lesbian Separatist argument in “Twenty-One Love Poems.” According to Rich, a lesbian must be brave to be honest about the most natural and innate aspect of her personality: her lesbianism. Zimmerman, a stronger Separatist, would concur, although for her all women readers would be innate lesbians in hiding. For both, to accept one’s lesbianism is to free the self. To engage in a relationship is to have enough faith in the self to fight misogyny among both heterosexuals and gay men. As Hogan and Hudson note, Rich views an acceptance of innate sexuality as fundamental to the fight for freedom and for achieving equality with patriarchal and sexist groups:

Asserting that the very existence of lesbianism had most often been denied, ignored, obscured, or subsumed under the category of male homosexuality, she [Rich] envisaged...a political analysis of Compulsory Heterosexuality. (Hogan & Hudson 361)
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For Rich, simply acknowledging the existence of lesbian relationships is a politically and intellectually liberating act. “Twenty-One Love Poems,” by dealing with the difficulties lesbian couples have in establishing and maintaining relationships in a heterosexist and misogynist society, defies an oppressive hegemony. Heterosexist hegemony unfairly makes meaningful lesbian relationships more difficult because it corrupts natural lesbian desire. Although Zimmerman feels that all heterosexual women are women who have yet to find the right woman to straighten them out, both she and Rich feel that an internalization of negative beliefs about normal sexuality is the greatest obstacle to lesbian liberation. The couple in “Twenty-One Love Poems” requires true bravery to free their minds to their natural sexual relationship and to fight the system that warps such natural desire.

Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Down the Little Cahaba,” like Rich’s work, is strongly influenced by its author’s political ideologues. As Kallet and Clark note, “Pratt began to write when her ten-year marriage ended in a fight to retain custody of her two sons. She is the founding member of LIPS, a lesbian-feminist action group” (151). Pratt wrote “Down the Little Cahaba” as an examination of the loss of her children. The work examines a specific example from the author’s life that embodies how heterosexist prejudice harms lesbians and their families. The hegemony states that a lesbian cannot be a good mother so Pratt lost custody of her children. In the poem, Pratt and her children float in inner tubes down the Little Cahaba. An extended metaphor between birth imagery and floating down the river is employed in the work: “[T]he standing water at the lip, hover, hover, / the moment before orgasm, before the head emerges...the youngest caught in the rapids: half-grown, he hasn’t lived with me in years” (Pratt 152).

Birth imagery, much like in the visual art of Judy Chicago, is an empowering tool personifying femininity. Pratt’s use of the river/birthing-womb metaphor enables her to create the mournful, grieving tone in “Down the Little Cahaba:” “How do we know you won’t forget us? / I told them how they had moved in my womb...I can never forget. You moved inside me...[t]he sound of your blood crossed into mine” (Pratt 152). Pratt claims her femininity and her motherhood, which had been transgressed by the larger heterosexist society when she and her children were denied one another.

Pratt’s poem focuses on her natural right to her children as a woman and a lesbian. The use of the river/birthing-womb metaphor is a perfect example of Pratt fighting for her freedom by claiming her motherhood. This approach to her experience is highly relevant to an understanding of her militant, pro-motherhood stance; many
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Lesbian Feminists, such as Rita Mae Brown, describe motherhood and children in far more repellent tones than Pratt. Stressing the right of lesbians not to have children, Brown creates the following passage between a closeted lesbian mother (Leota) and the liberated lesbian protagonist (Molly) in her groundbreaking novel Rubyfruit Jungle:

Leota—same cat eyes, same languid body, but oh god, she looked forty-five years old and she had two brats hanging on to her like possums. I looked twenty-four. She saw herself in my reflection and there was a pain in her eyes... “They drive me crazy sometimes but I love them.” “Sure,” I said. What else could I say? Every mother says the same thing. (216-217)

Both Brown and Pratt are militant. The distinction between their two depictions of lesbian motherhood can be explained by an understanding of changes in the issues Lesbian Feminists faced from the 1970’s to today. Brown militantly protests an oppressive hegemony forcing lesbians into a closeted/mother/wife role that prevents their lives from being fulfilling. Pratt militantly protests heterosexism denying lesbians the rights of motherhood. As chosen and not forced motherhood is now more common, Lesbian Feminists increasingly focus upon lesbians fighting for their motherhood more frequently than in the past.

An understanding of this change is necessary for an understanding of “Down the Little Cahaba” because, in light of theories such as Rich’s Compulsory Heterosexuality, the poem could be misread as assimilationist. Rich was, in many respects, like Brown’s Leota: a married lesbian with children. Rich’s theory could be misapplied to show Pratt under a false light as a woman who participates in her own oppression and envisions herself as a helpless victim. Pratt is most certainly not taking such a disempowering, assimilationist stance with “Down the Little Cahaba.” Exemplifying Rich’s theory of Compulsory Heterosexuality, Pratt, like Brown’s Leota, was a participant in her oppression. Believing heterosexist hegemony, she was an agent of her own oppression; however, Pratt is a now-liberated woman simply by being honest about her lesbianism. If nothing else, her stance may be seen as militant because she claims her femininity and her motherhood as a lesbian. Her children were stolen. Her motherhood was transgressed. Pratt does not appeal to her motherhood because it is a trait that most straight women have; Pratt simply says that she was wronged. Straights and gay men may learn from her poem, but she is writing to liberate herself and people like her. Judy Grahn, in her critical work on lesbian poets entitled
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Judy Grahn, in her critical work on lesbian poets entitled
The Highest Apple, notes the importance of claiming Lesbian Femininity within Lesbian Separatist groups in the 1970's.

The organizations we proceeded to define and develop were Lesbian separatists, with feminist and radical underbase. From the meeting grew all-women's households...that gave rise to...newspapers...to the first all-women's bookstore...to the first all-women's press...Meetings of all kinds took place in the house, such as the first meeting of the Lesbian Mother's Union...Once we had our concerns going we found that plenty of people wanted to listen to us. We had a voice. (xviii)

Grahn's association of the Lesbian Mother's Union with women's literature and media exemplifies motherhood and femininity as belonging to lesbians and not just being on loan from straight women. Validation of the choice to not have children by authors such as Brown should not cause Pratt to be misread.

In a similar fashion, Lisa Springer's "Between Girls" strongly promotes the claiming of a woman-oriented approach to life as a way to claim power. Just as Pratt was an agent of her own oppression by marrying a man, Springer, writing of her childhood, demonstrates how an oppressive hegemony can warp a woman's consciousness. In this case, Springer includes a heterosexual character (Miriam) that Springer (as a young woman) loved without knowing that her affection was lesbian in nature. As is evidenced in "Between Girls," Springer did not understand what her feelings for Miriam were:

I didn't know I was [a lesbian]. Now, with the knowledge of who I am, I can go back to those sharp memories and make sense of the emotional confusion that colored our interactions, and I can understand the detours our relationship took—like the time I had an affair with her father. (523)

Springer not only did not understand how she felt for Miriam but also did not even know what those emotions were.

Acting hand in hand with Compulsory Heterosexuality is Heterosexual Privilege, which Hogan and Hudson define as "a seemingly beneficial but ultimately restrictive socialization that...[leads] heterosexual women to perpetuate their own oppression" (Hogan and Hudson 361). Instead of a cooperative friendship, Springer and Miriam are parasitic "friends" trying to control each other the way men try to control women. Springer feels like the favorite pet of her far richer friend. She notes: "I am not
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Miriam’s possession...I am not the friend of the year” (Springer 525). In return, she sleeps with both Miriam’s boyfriend and father. Because of an oppressive hegemony, Springer’s attraction for Miriam is warped into a desire to possess, if not her directly, at least what she possesses. Miriam in turn discovers the betrayal and allows Springer just enough rope (in this case, letting Springer brag about her sexual worldliness) with which to hang herself. Springer is justly shamed. The section of the essay that displays the greatest warmth is also one of the most warped: “‘I’m glad to know I have power over you,’ Miriam said. I smiled then. This was as close as Miriam would come to admitting that I mattered to her” (Springer 530).

Their dysfunctional relationship evolves from women substituting affection for mutual attempts to dominate the other, as misogynist men do to women. With maturity and a claiming of her lesbian-identity, Springer looks back upon a time in her life when an oppressive heterosexist and misogynist hegemony dehumanized both her and a friend. Although Springer grants attention to her heterosexual friend, she is really secondary to her examination of the oppression lesbians face. As Springer explains in a letter used as a preface to “Between Girls,” she writes primarily to liberate lesbians:

During my own adolescence I wish

that I had been able to read about girls’ sexual feeling for each other. But this is a subject hardly ever written about....Like all of my work, this essay [“Between Girls”] deals with the difficulties for lesbians of understanding our private lives in a world that offers little discussion, no rituals, and minimal acceptance of same gender sexual love. I feel there is an urgent need for more writing about women loving women. (Springer 522)

Springer is writing to offer fellow lesbians a context for their feelings so that they may not suffer as she did from a total misunderstanding of self. Although Springer may be seen as offering more attention to heterosexual women’s issues than Rich or Pratt do, her focus on Lesbian Separatism is not diluted by her sympathies for oppressed straight women.

The political goals of Rich, Pratt, and Springer are to achieve intellectual, emotional, and political equality for lesbians: to free them from thinking themselves unworthy and thus perpetuating their own oppression. Lesbians who believe in the myths projected onto them by heterosexism along with those who are personally liberated and want to continue the fight are the intended audience of these works. Others may sit in on the discussion...
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