EXCAVATING LESBIAN FEMINISM FROM THE QUEER PUBLIC BODY:
THE INDISPENSABILITY OF WOMAN-IDENTIFICATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on my own process of entry into local queer, lesbian and feminist public cultures, I argue that a powerful relationship between feminist and lesbian existence can be felt and that this sensibility bears influence on the way queer erotic and politicized identities emerge in relation to one another. These affective links remain frequently unacknowledged and/or are actively repudiated due to popular accounts of feminist genealogy whereby second wave lesbian-feminist positions are rendered fundamentally incompatible with contemporary queer/third wave feminist ones. I challenge this narrative by building on select early articulations of radical lesbian feminism to show that when affirmed consciously, the sense that lesbianism and feminism are interconnected constitutes a “woman-identified experience” and an opportunity to bear witness to the unrealized possibilities of second-wave radical feminism in the present. I conclude that politicized “lesbian” and/or “woman” identification remain indispensable strategic sites from which to observe and confront heteropatriarchy.
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INTRODUCTION

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women’s liberation and is the basis for the cultural revolution. Together, we must find, reinforce and validate our authentic selves. [...] With that real self, with that consciousness, we begin a revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression. (Radicalesbians, The Woman-Identified-Woman, 1973 p.237)

Woman-Identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community; the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure, have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other. (Adrienne Rich, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, 1983 p.199)

I begin with passages from two highly influential and more recently, highly contentious lesbian-feminist works whose original publication dates (1970 and 1980, respectively) very approximately demarcate what is often constructed, falsely perhaps, to be lesbian feminism’s ‘second wave’ lifespan as an organized movement. Roughly four decades later, I am struck by how stunningly these two passages speak to a field of questions that resonate with my own long-held living inquiry; questions around the curious interplay between the erotic and the political, and specifically around the relationship between lesbian and feminist existence. My feelings of
resonance with these pieces suggest a thread of continuity that is especially interesting and important to take notice of in a cultural climate where the archetypal figure of the ‘feminist-as-lesbian’ and politicized woman-identification are vehemently rejected and exist only as ghost-like figures within contemporary queer/third wave feminist political culture; as traces or echoes in the present of something lost, forgotten or repressed.

In addition to disparaging constructions of the feminist-as-lesbian that are so pervasive in mainstream homophobic and misogynist culture, lesbian feminism and politicized lesbian and woman-identification are also repudiated by queer and third wave feminists—both within and beyond academic subcultures—as part of the second wave radical feminism against which they so frequently define themselves. Central to this repudiation are charges of ‘essentialism’ which are levelled against all woman-identified praxis and provide the basis for wholesale dismissals of lesbian-feminist positions by consigning them to the allegedly outmoded past of the second wave.

This pervasive accusation of ‘essentialism’ covers a range of criticisms. Included among these are charges of ethnocentrism and/or universalism whereby appeals to women’s affinities and solidarity are thought to obscure differences and structures of domination among women. The charge may also be used to refer to politics which are narrowly focused on a single-issue rather than on multi-centered, broad-based societal change or biologically determinist positions which assume the innateness and inevitability of gender dualism, if not male dominance.

Misinterpretations of early second wave woman-identified feminist positions (practiced by diverse feminist groups including but not limited to lesbian feminists), have left queers and third wave feminist critics feeling that it is necessary to deny all woman-identified positions or else risk falling into such reactionary naive and simplistic positions. However, this fear rests on a
failure to distinguish between reductionist essentialist presumptions of women-identification and the integrative non-essentialist achievements of women-identification which co-existed in second wave feminism. By re-claiming integrative woman-identification, my intention is not to conceal major imperfections and serious concerns in the way some woman-identified politics have been carried out, but rather to point to missed opportunities that result from wholesale rejections which shut down dialogue.

I suggest that the passages I opened with above, as well as the larger works from which they are drawn, on the contrary, exemplify the important and powerful collective political achievement of non-essentialist integrative woman-identified lesbian feminism. The abandoned, unrealized possibilities of which, I argue, can be felt as subtle traces in present queer/lesbian/feminist social movement cultures, even when they fail to be consciously realized. Integrative woman-identified positions are multi-centred, broad-based and non-assimilationist in the sense that they are designed to address all forms of domination and are committed to the deep rooted transformation of society as a whole. This framework is rooted in the belief that local struggle is the only basis for global solidarity in that women’s commonality and diversity are mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive. Furthermore, though it would seem affirming the category “woman” would involve the reinforcing of a fixed, innate gender structure, the integrative position understands that claiming the category “woman” is a necessary move in the commitment to challenge, expand, resist and transform its parameters (Miles, 1996).

In my thesis, I draw on personal experiences and observations of my own process of entry into and participation in local lesbian/queer/feminist public cultures to show that within the historical context of heteropatriarchy, a seemingly organic relationship between lesbian existence and feminist resistance can be felt. I suggest that this affective link continues to bear influence on
the way dissident/queer erotic and politicized identities emerge in relation to one another, if only sometimes at the level of intuitive, sensual knowledge. I argue that such feelings, if consciously and collectively realized, constitute women-identified experiences that might offer powerful and relevant—indeed, indispensable—strategic sites from which to practice contemporary queer and feminist politics. As such, my study will attempt to mine the present for signs of the feminist-as-lesbian “ghost figure”, as a method for bringing non-essentialist integrative, woman-identified lesbian feminism into a meaningful, transformative and continuous relationship with contemporary queer and third wave feminist positions.
Standing inside the 2010 installation, “A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge” by Toronto artist Allyson Mitchell at the Art Gallery of Ontario, I cannot help but feel a sense of resonance and connection. After all, the piece is one within Mitchell’s ongoing series of utopian spaces built from reclaimed textiles that offer sanctuaries which literally—and figuratively—can touch and be touched by those who enter them (Cvetkovich, 2011). To an extent, this particular installation is a visual reproduction of the reading room in Brooklyn, New York’s Lesbian Herstory Archives, founded in 1974 in the Upper West Side apartment of radical lesbian couple, Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel (Cvetkovich, 2011). This site was a convening place and breeding ground for early lesbian feminist community, culture and consciousness-raising and the LHA was built largely on its politics and principles. Flourishing on a large scale in the early seventies for the first time, lesbian-feminism offered a politicized language for lesbianism which centered itself on the radical feminist notion that ‘the personal is political’ (Ellis & Peel, 2010). Though lesbian feminism is by no means a monolithic or seamless movement, across its varying expressions it holds the core belief that since lesbianism is made invisible, invalid and punished as a way of controlling women under patriarchy, accepting the label ‘lesbian’ can be understood of as a form of resistance to the heteropatriarchal order as well as an expression of commitment to women (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). According to lesbian feminist writer, Sheila Jeffreys, what made lesbian feminism distinguishable from other varieties of lesbian politics was its emphasis on the need for some degree of separation from the politics,
institutions, and culture of men (2003). Along this line of reasoning, The Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) established its founding principle and purpose to “uncover and collect a herstory denied to us [lesbians and women] previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture in which they serve” (LHA.org 2012). The LHA continues to fulfill its mandate of collecting and preserving materials that record the living histories of lesbian lives. However, to many of its visitors who may be too young to have experienced this transformative era first hand, The LHA above all else functions to historicize the spirit and to honor the contributions of a critical period in lesbian and feminist history; a period loosely defined as the second wave women’s movement. Though relatively recent, in paying it homage, this period is frequently imagined—perhaps mistakenly—as belonging to a particular style or praxis no longer entirely relevant and therefore as consigned to that past.

In Allyson Mitchell’s exhibit at the AGO (2010), the street-facing gallery on the ground level is wallpapered from floor to ceiling with row upon row of her scrupulously hand drawn book spines meant to simulate the LHA’s rich library. The titles range from lesbian-feminist movement writings such as Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love’s “Sappho was a Right on Woman” (1972) and Jill Johnson’s “Lesbian Nation” (1973) to more well-known feminist classics such as Betty Freidan’s “The Feminine Mystique” (1963) and Germaine Greer’s “The Female Eunuch” (1970). In her report on the installation, Ann Cvetkovich importantly notes that the shelves include writings by women of color like Gloria Anzualdua and Audre Lorde, more recent works within queer theory including trans authors like Jack (Judith) Halberstam and Kate Bornstein, as well as publications within popular genres such as comics, self-help, pulp-fiction and erotica. Though the LHA may have emerged out of a very particular era, culture and politics, the breadth
of its collection spans from roughly the turn of the 20th century until the present and it ranges across a wide variety of cultures and perspectives.

Mitchell’s installation is especially evocative for me, because her obviously heartfelt tribute to this particular collection of literary artifacts, even in the absence of their contents, offers familiar visual cues that conjure up my own intimate encounters with many of these texts in university and public library stacks, women’s bookstores, the offices of feminist professors, and on the shelves of friends and colleagues. Several texts have made their way into my own personal collection, into passionate conversations, and into a bibliography that has informed my own writing as well as the way I relate and communicate in the world. To state my point differently, being inside and a part of Mitchell’s art elicits warm memories of transformative reading experiences, delight at the thought of prospective learning, and prompts me to recall my own journey, not just to an abundant well of literature and scholarly knowledge but also to an ongoing discovery of community, of self and of political consciousness. For me, the space recalls the intellectual, and indeed emotional work that deep paradigm shifts demand; work that has been at once onerous as well as a source of great pleasure. In Cvetkovich’s words (2011),

…[T]hese wallpaper shelves do more than provide an invaluable bibliography of lesbian feminist authors, subjects, genres, and presses; they also suggest the passion inspired by the Lesbian Herstory Archives as a repository of not just books but lesbian lives (p.1)

Mitchell’s meticulous sketching of every intimate graphic detail on the book spines is nothing short of a labour of love that for me powerfully signals a core lesbian-feminist theme of the deeply rooted links between intellectual and erotic/affective life. Situated in the centre of the space, are two oversized papier-mâché female mannequins sheathed in gold and silver leafing
that stand back to back on a reflective pedestal. Though they face the stacks and not each other, their hands appear to be reaching for one another. Umbilical-like cables connect the mannequin figures to the book shelves, to one another and to a giant crocheted brain overhead by their groins. In my reading of it, this imagery is meant to embody the concept of the interconnectedness between thinking and feeling and between the women’s passionate political convictions and their sexual/romantic desire for one another.

SECTION 2

CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE FEMINIST-AS-LESBIAN IN POPULAR AND QUEER/FEMINIST SUBCULTURES

“A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge”, to me, is a celebration of the legacy of overlapping lesbian and feminist existence. The unapologetic tone Mitchell takes in this expression is salient given the negative connotation of this trope both in mainstream culture and in lesbian/queer and third-wave feminist subcultures—presumably distinct discursive spheres. The conflation of feminism with lesbianism runs deep throughout the public psyche, and is rooted in the assumption of a natural linkage between sex, gender and sexual object choice whereby evidence of one’s “femaleness” is expected to align neatly with the expression of feminine roles and behaviors, perhaps the most imperative of which is heterosexuality (Phelan, 1993). By this line of reasoning, any displays of deviance from sexist standards of femininity are frequently read as signs of lesbianism. While this association has been imbued with affirmative and even subversive meaning within lesbian and other feminist countercultures, popularly, the lesbian/feminist link has been the basis for relentless tactics of backlash against feminism and the
women’s movement and is the source for common incidents of lesbian bashing directed at women perceived as defying female gender roles and expectations. By implication, it is the conflation of lesbianism with feminism which underlies popular stereotypes of feminists as drab/homely, humorless, frigid, joy-killing man-haters. Of course, this unflattering—implicitly lesbian—caricature, applies to any woman (regardless of her sexuality) who declares herself, her body, energies, services and commitments, inaccessible/unavailable to men, or who exhibits any type of disobedience from the gender order for that matter. Illustrative of this logic is this well-known quotation attributed to ultraconservative American televangelist, Pat Robertson (1992) in which he expresses his view that, “the feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, and become lesbians” (“Pat Robertson”, n.d.). In characterizing feminism as a witch-like cult of lesbianism, the speaker expresses and provokes a fear of the destruction of a coveted and tenuous status quo by feminism’s perceived evil forces.

Before the opportunity for a substantive, meaningful engagement with feminism, it is all too often the case that this unflattering and insidious caricature significantly structures many young women’s affective relationships to feminism. As a three-time teaching assistant for an Introductory course to Women’s Studies, I can certainly speak to the frequency with which I have observed students express an initial ambivalence or flat out reluctance to identify with feminism based on many of these bleak associations. Efforts to regain the respectability of feminism and to discredit the pejorative cliché of the feminist-as-lesbian often rely on the downplaying of the strong lesbian presence in women’s studies and in other feminist spaces by dismissing this fact as apolitical and as merely incidental or arbitrary. Sadly, this defence of feminism at the expense of lesbianism, is evidence of a failure—or perhaps a refusal—to
recognize the tight interdependence between heterosexuality and the patriarchal gender order which both produces the archetype of the feminist-as-lesbian, and is also the very thing that motivates so many young women to disidentify with it. In such cases, the opportunity for a positive affirmation of the feminist/lesbian link as potentially powerful/empowering or transformative is precluded.

This figure of the feminist-as-lesbian, often along with many of its negative associations, has become a powerful symbol with which second-wave feminism has become organized in the collective cultural memory. Historical representations of lesbian-feminist movements, both within and outside of academic feminism, are often characterized as exemplifying the kind of embarrassingly naïve and misguided politics that the second wave of the women’s movement is critiqued for more broadly (Duggan, 1992; Stein, 1992, 1993). As such, the lesbian-as-feminist figure has come to designate all that is considered unworthy of preservation from this period generally. She has become a figure emblematic of “essentialist” and single-issue identity politics; the vilification of men and “male values”; a symbol for the white, western, middle-class elitism in the women’s movement; racism, transphobia and intolerance of female masculinity; the sign of naïve utopianism, excessive idealism and righteous political correctness; of downwardly mobile economic politics; and of the prescriptive, repressive policing of women’s sexuality, appearance and behavior. In effect, the concurrent expression of feminism together with lesbianism has come to be marked as passé, out of time and anachronistic. Even when implicit or unconscious, it is ultimately the image of the feminist-as-lesbian against whom queer and third-wave feminists have ardently sought to define themselves in harsh contradistinction (rather than in continuity) and against whom a more transgressive and sophisticated political praxis is imagined to have emerged.
Many of these, tidy, homogenizing characterizations of lesbian-feminism, as Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp explain (1993), reflect only select cultural expressions of a larger, dynamic movement and therefore should not be uncritically thought of as corresponding to the movement’s governing ideological position. Lesbian feminism emerged as a sub movement of radical feminism, as Stevi Jackson points out, and therefore shares radical feminism’s materialist roots which can be thought of as emphatically non-essentialist, even though “essentialism” is a concept and term that was coined only later with the development of the post-structuralist/postmodern turn in the feminist academy (1999, 2006). By radical materialist feminist reasoning, gender divisions are not understood to be natural phenomenon but rather historically bound social realities that require reclaiming in order to be revalued and transformed (Jackson, 1999, 2006).

SECTION 3
ADRIENNE RICH’S “COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND LESBIAN EXISTENCE”: MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND CLARIFICATIONS

There is no other theoretical work more revealing, perhaps, of the non-essentialist, integrative and radically transformative origins of woman-identified lesbian feminism, than Adrienne Rich’s highly influential though frequently misunderstood essay, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence—originally published in 1980 (1983). It was in this essay that Adrienne Rich famously built upon lesbian-feminist theorizing developed collectively roughly throughout the prior decade. In it, Rich draws on and expands a new feminist political language for lesbianism outside the dominant clinical framework of illness or deviance and
beyond the liberal discourse in which lesbianism could be thought of only as personal preference and of lesbians simply understood as a minority group. Until the early second wave, the women’s movement had neither been especially hospitable to lesbians, nor sympathetic to their experiences (Garber 2001). Rich highlighted lesbians’ unique subject position, as women-oriented women, in male centered patriarchal cultures as central. She reasoned that through acknowledging the politics, economics and cultural propaganda of institutionalized heterosexuality—wherein women’s bodies, labour and children have been defined as the property of men within the historical context of patriarchy—one can begin to understand and reveal processes of ideological control that produce what she called a “false consciousness” through which female heterosexuality is presumed and experienced as a natural inclination. She argued that only through this realization could one begin to sense the latent and as yet unnamed political significance of a women’s erotic orientation toward other women.

Rich sought to bridge the differences between lesbian and heterosexual women—even if only as a rhetorical strategy to consolidate feminist solidarity across difference. To this end, Rich introduced her widely debated notion of a lesbian continuum to which any woman who has ever participated in myriad forms of intimate sociability and solidarity with other women belonged. Through her conception of a ‘lesbian continuum’ Rich rhetorically envisaged a fragmented, miscalled and erased history of female resistance to heteropatriarchy in the form of a broad range of support systems and intense primary interactions between and among women. Rich suggested that these might have included but should certainly not be limited only to contemporary definitions of lesbianism which too often were reduced to overt expressions of sexual desire alone. Women she included along this continuum are witches, femmes seules, marriage resisters, spinsters and autonomous widows, since in a variety of different ways, each
had resisted the coercive imposition of heterosexuality and hence, at least in part, had resisted her prescribed gender role. This work was a relatively late, but more developed strategic articulation of the radical feminist position that had named a women-centered continuum, and pointed to patriarchal modes of control of female sexuality. In it, Adrienne Rich had expanded and clarified a radical lesbian feminist language through which the deeply felt eroticism of proximities between women could be understood as a core element of women’s knowledge and resistance to male possession and control.

Much of the controversy and debate that Adrienne Rich’s radical thesis eventually sparked played out against a cultural and political backdrop in which constructions of radical feminism as ‘essentialist’ and ‘non-integrative’ were increasingly dominant. One particular group of her critics, the editors of the 1983 anthology, *Powers of Desire*, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, expressed their particular concerns around Rich’s very widespread notion of “false consciousness” and “lesbian continuum”. They argued that the notion of a “false consciousness” implied a hierarchy of feminist practice in that they believed that heterosexual women were being presumed to suffer from “wrong thinking” thus seemingly casting lesbian-feminism as the best or only adequate feminism. They argued that the idea of a “lesbian continuum” implied an easy and idealized sense of sisterhood in which differences had to be suppressed in the name of sameness. They felt that the suggestion that diverse types of female bonding could be understood as common through being included within the category ‘lesbian’ risked de-eroticizing lesbianism and concealing the specificity of lesbian oppression and resistance (Rich,1986; Yorke, 1997; Hesford, 2005).

These critiques and interpretations of Rich’s work reflect a larger scale evolution that was taking place in the women’s movement at the time and reflect a generalized impression of
woman-identified lesbian-feminism of which Rich has become a prime representative—as a sign of simplistic, outmoded politics. Rich published her correspondence with her critics in the afterward of her 1986 collection, Blood Bread and Poetry, in which she clarifies that her intentions for writing the piece were anything but an endorsement of the type of naïve essentialism or purist separatism her critics were imposing on her. On the contrary, her conceptualization of a ‘false consciousness’ had been intended neither to promote a rigid gender-based separatism as an end in itself, nor as a place of emigration whereby male dominance could be evaded rather than engaged. Nor did she mean to imply a kind of separatism that was about carving out a specifically and uniquely lesbian politics at the expense of a broad-based, integrative politics for the liberation for all women. Rather, her taking up of the concept ‘false consciousness’, borrowed from Marx, was meant to invite women to engage and confront the historicity of male power which is both concealed and revealed by a set of socially given institutional practices through which heterosexuality is made to appear as a natural “compulsion” or tendency. Rich tried to make it clear that she neither meant to suggest that all women were necessarily victims of heterosexuality nor that all heterosexual couplings were inevitably doomed to be unsatisfying or oppressive. However, only by working through what has “glided so silently into the foundations of our thought” could one begin to become conscious of the otherwise hidden emotional labour through which heterosexuality is “instituted” (1983, 202).

Had Rich in fact been promoting a lesbian praxis that could conceive of itself as existing simply outside the governing system, this would have necessitated the assumption that neither men nor women were capable of changing and would have suggested doubt that strategic resistance for women within heteropatriarchy could be possible. Rich, however, steadfastly held to the radical materialist feminist position on which her conception of a lesbian continuum was
based—whereby, what often is taken to be the basis for oppression—in this case, “woman-ness” and “lesbian-ness”—is not an inherent or natural essence but rather only its mark imposed by the oppressor, which materializes in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of a class of people called “women” (Jackson, 2006; Yorke, 1997). She explained that her “Lesbian Continuum”, was a means to conceptualize what was common amongst a class of people with the mark of a decidedly female subject position—emphatically within historically specific patriarchal cultures—but who were nevertheless in a variety of ways pushing the boundaries of its parameters. She hoped to correct misinterpretations of her work that saw the idea of a continuum as a nod to an idealized sisterhood premised only on sameness by pointing out to her critics that asserting a commonality between diverse subjects who emerge as women within the common socio-historical situation of patriarchy is quite different than stating that all women are the same. In fact, Rich’s critics may have overlooked the great care she took throughout her writing to emphasize that the articulation of a gendered female subject position was a major and difficult feminist political achievement that far from precluding an understanding of difference, heterogeneity and a politics of location, actually fundamentally required it.

In an insightful article, In the Defence of the Category Woman, author Lena Gunnarsson reminds readers that the search for commonalities necessarily presupposes diversity which in turn becomes meaningful only from the perspective of some kind of sameness (2011). Or, as put simply by Naomi Zack, “commonality does not ignore or suppress difference because it is the basis on which difference exists, and is what we implicitly refer to when we say women are different” (Zack 2005 as quoted in Gunnarsson, 2011, p.28). Rich, and other like-minded feminist radicals who took an integrative, holistic view of politics, knew that only by virtue of the fact that commonly suffered gender hierarchy and institutionalized heterosexuality could be
felt and recognized in vastly diverse local contexts and variations could a gender specific power structure come into view. Only then could the material basis of the discursive category “woman” be seen as having enough internal coherence to be named as one (differentiated) whole (Gunnarson, 2011). Furthermore, since the insidious material reality of “women-identified experiences” within patriarchy, have been made invisible within history, the act of naming these is less a description of women’s, or patriarchy’s “empirical essence”, and more a recognition of a shared context of oppression that can be observed, measured, theorized—and only then, transformed (ibid.). In fact, even the earliest articulation of politicised lesbianism by the Radicalesbians collective in their 1970 manifesto *The Woman-Identified-Woman*, upon which Rich’s work largely builds—reveals that from its inception, lesbian-feminism held to this “non-essentialist” and integrative position whereby ‘woman’ and ‘lesbian’ identification are understood to be strategic, provisional, and transformative positions and whereby lesbian politics is understood to be about carving out a space through which to enrich and deepen a feminism for everybody. The Radicalesbians’ highly-cited definition of ‘lesbian’ as “the rage of all [emphasis mine] women condensed to the point of explosion”, effectively illustrates this point (Radicalesbians, 2000, p.233). Following from this, Rich’s idea of a ‘lesbian continuum’ was about connecting diverse lesbian and non-lesbian women though revealing and creating a collective relationship between different episodes, places, and times of resistance to and expansion of the dominant symbolic space of “woman” through which new forms of feminist community could emerge (Hesford, 2005).
Though the foundations of woman-identified lesbian feminism may have been non-essentialist and integrative as I have shown, the ways in which these politics have manifested culturally have sometimes strayed from these roots. Many women fueled by the prospect of a life free of men’s patronizing and violent dominance and a world that values women, began to cultivate separatist lesbian communities starting in the early 1970s in ways that, in some cases, undeniably slipped into the biological determinism which was only later named the “essentialism” which lesbian-feminism as a whole is so harshly and regularly critiqued (Shugar, 1995; Phelan, 1989; Weigman, 1994; Stein, 1992; Rudy, 2001). In urban locations across North America, Western Europe and Australia, many women’s only communities sought to revolutionize women’s lives by nurturing and celebrating a female-centered counterculture organized around events such as readings, dances, bookstores, and concerts—all by and for women and sometimes lesbians alone. Kathy Rudy effectively describes this incarnation of lesbian feminism in her personal account of her experience participating in one particular lesbian separatist community in Durham, North Carolina in the mid 1970s (2001). Rudy testifies that the binding sentiment amongst her community was the belief that a new and revolutionary world could be built on such values as care, compassion, pacifism, and collectivism which were not only thought to be morally superior but emphatically inherent to women (rather than merely historically assigned to and developed by them). As such, this predominating discourse encouraged the avoidance of men, distrust of “hetero sisters” who “fraternized with the enemy”
and the valorization of lesbianism as the most effective way to practice feminist politics and of creating a “seamless safe-haven from Patriarchy” (Rudy, 2001, p.210).

Kathy Rudy recounts her own eventual disenchantment with a community that she had once deemed such a source of empowerment. Echoing a very similar narrative as some other first-hand accounts from former members of lesbian-feminist communities, Rudy recalls a growing feeling that her unique history, style, desires and opinions were being forcefully suppressed by a misguided notion of community membership predicated on “common oppression” mistakenly taken to mean utter sameness (Stein, 1993; Everett, 1992; Shugar, 1995; Ross, 1995). Similar, though perhaps justifiably angrier critiques of lesbian separatism by a number of women-of-color have drawn particular attention to the way in which the emotional appeal of a shared victim status and a superficial vision of lesbian sisterhood, unconditional love, bonding and harmony between all women had enabled an overall unwillingness to acknowledge complex power relations along deep lines of racial and economic difference amongst women within these communities; in effect, masking separatist lesbian communities’ undeniably white, western and middle class location (Lorde, 1984; Anzualdua & Moraga, 1984; Anzualdua, 1987; Hull, Smith, & Scott, 1982; Combahee River Collective, 1977). Several of these critiques have pointed specifically to the inadequacy of a feminism which mandates the absolute separation of women from their respective communities or origin, forcing them to break off ties of solidarity with men around shared struggles against racism (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Hull, Smith & Scott, 1982).

It is undeniable that particular groups and individuals have used the category ‘woman’/‘lesbian’ in ways that are homogenizing, ethnocentric and/or biologically deterministic—theoretical positions that have been labelled by the umbrella term “essentialism”.
However, Rich’s work in “Compulsory Heterosexuality”, as well as that of the Radicalesbians and other integrative woman-identified feminist work, offer compelling evidence that there is nothing necessarily “essentialist” about woman-identification as a political framework and position. In referencing these works, my intention has been to call into question the reductionist readings of woman-identification, taken to uniformly mean categorical homogenization and/or biological determinism on which wholesale rejections and distrust of lesbian-feminist second wave positions are so frequently based. By revealing the early radical feminist political strategy of consolidating women-identification that originally made coalition building across broad based difference possible—work that queer and/or third wave positions often imagine themselves to have developed only out of the failure of an earlier generation—I hope to do some of the intergenerational feminist continuity-bridging work that Rich herself had promoted.

SECTION 5
THE EMERGENCE OF QUEER THEORY:
HISTORICIZING SECOND WAVE LESBIAN FEMINISM

Essentialism and prescriptive separatism are the focus of much popular and academic criticism aimed at lesbian feminism (Garber, 2006) and are frequently named main sources of lesbian feminism’s eventual disintegration as an organized movement by the mid 1980s (Stein, 1992, 1993). Seldom are debates within these communities and amongst lesbian-feminists themselves recognized (Taylor and Rupp, 1993; Garber, 2006). The cultural and political shift out of second wave lesbian feminism and into third-wave/queer feminism is often depicted as a clean break with this history in much of the literature and in popular movement rhetoric, even
though the process evolved over the period of more than a decade (Henry, 2004). Historical elements that mark the cultural and political backdrop of this shift have included: the feminist sex wars; co-sexual activism responding to the AIDS epidemic and the formation of “Queer Nation” signaling the rebuilding of broken alliances between lesbians and gay men; the institutionalization of feminism marked by the foundation of Women’s Studies programs; the poststructuralist turn in the academy and the development of queer theory; and the emergence of “minority feminisms” including anti-racist, postcolonial and intersectional feminisms—the chronology of which remains highly disputed particularly in relation to “the second wave” (Hesford, 2005; Henry, 2004; Garber, 2001,2006).

The development of poststructuralist insight about multiple, fragmented, shifting identities along with the confrontational, direct-action approach to rebellion by queer nationals in the late 1980’s and 1990’s claimed to clarify what was thought to be so ineffectual about lesbian feminism’s resistance strategy—which of course, was often falsely portrayed as monolithic. Unreflectively conflating all of lesbian-feminism with prescriptive separatism and essentialism, queer theorists have tended to portray lesbian feminists’ withdrawal from heterosexuality as a kind of reactive escapism in order to show how naïve and ineffective it is for a movement to define itself so rigidly against that which it sought to unsettle (Butler, 1990; Segdewick,1993; Fuss, 1989). By this line of reasoning, some queer theorists have attributed their doubt of lesbian feminism’s ability to dismantle heteropatriarchy to its perceived flawed replication of a false dichotomy between heterosexuality and lesbianism, even if the hierarchy is reversed and lesbianism is presented as natural and pure and heterosexuality as coercive and constructed. Judith Butler, perhaps the most highly cited theorist associated with this queer theoretical turn,
expresses this criticism in the following statement from her hugely influential work, Gender Trouble (1990). Here, she argues:

Lesbianism that defines itself in radical exclusion from heterosexuality deprives itself of the capacity to resignify the very heterosexual constructs by which it is partially and inevitably constituted. As a result, that lesbian strategy would consolidate compulsory heterosexuality in its oppressive, as opposed to volitional or optional forms.” (p. 128).

By conceptualizing existence within multiple, fragmented, shifting, and conflicting identities, radical queers could conceive of themselves as less dependent on mechanisms that police community membership, enabling movement across a range of overlapping structures of power and violence thus “conjuring a series of margins that have no identity” (Warner, 1993, p.vii). As such, in contradistinction to a rather limited image of lesbian-feminism, queer theory and politics could be seen as better suited to build political alliances across deep racial, economic, geographic and many other differences. By this logic, queers could conceive of themselves as better adept at transcending the governing logic of the hierarchies heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, normative/deviant and centre/margin by deferring the stable, unified, one-dimensional subjectivity that has become associated with the woman-identified political subject of lesbian feminism.

Theoretical debates such as the one I have only briefly elucidated above, in part, have come to demarcate feminist generations—popularly framed using the metaphor of “waves”—as discrete periods succeeding one another and as progressively improving over time. The common theoretical/political self reference “queer-feminist” which I have noticed increasingly being used in social movement communities both within and outside of academic circles exemplifies the
popular schema of progress for organizing feminist time. Here, it seems “queer” is serving to qualify a feminism that is by implication, rudimentary and inadequate on its own. Leslie McCall has pointed out that the oversimplification or obscuring of the theoretical past is a tendency that can be observed in the way most new knowledge is constructed (2005). She reveals conventions by which new theoretical perspectives are presented as necessary remedies to the inadequacy and faultiness of established ones; conventions by which she explains, “the new must be celebrated on the tomb of the old” (as quoted in Gunnarson, 2011, p.26). Even at the very outset of the development of queer theory and politics in the late 1980’s, Teresa De Lauretis, expressed suspicion of queer theorists’ and activists’ inclination to “typologize and brand different feminisms along an ascending scale of theoretical sophistication where essentialism weighs heavy at the bottom end” (1989, p.4 as quoted in Hesford, 2005 p.240). She speculated that it was ultimately the greater risks involved in the early radical feminist commitment to politicize the category “woman” which motivated such wholesale dismissals of second-wave radical feminist positions and prompted the construction and imposition of “essentialism” onto them.

In the following section of my paper, I take up Allyson Mitchell’s notion of “Deep Lez”, Victoria Hesford’s idea of the “feminist-as-lesbian” ghost figure, in light of Adrienne Rich’s conception of a “lesbian continuum”. I show how they might present new ways of relating to the recent feminist past that challenge popular understandings of the “waves” of feminist historical time as “still, enveloping waters”, as Meryl Altman put it, but instead as, “forces affected by gravity which pull back, even as they seem to follow one another” (as quoted in Freeman, p.20). Keeping these frameworks in mind, I offer ways of encountering in the present, opportunities to revive the unrealized commitments of consolidating non-essentialist, integrative “woman-identification”, as this was articulated in early lesbian-feminist theorizing.
SECTION 6
DEEP LEZ AND THE GHOST OF THE FEMINIST-AS-LESBIAN:
REFRAMING FEMINIST HISTORY

In Allyson Mitchell’s art installation, the lesbian/feminist figures appear as lifeless monuments, immortalized as metallic trophies displayed on a pedestal. The book spine reproductions that surround them of course lack any substance or depth. By representing the link between lesbianism and feminism in this way—as a kind of artifact that might be found in a museum—the attention of the participants/spectators who convene in the space of the installation is effectively drawn toward the shiny, visually compelling objects being staged and therefore away from their own attendance in the space and contribution to the art. As such, Mitchell risks reproducing a common collective fantasy wherein the lesbian-feminist is imagined as a thoroughly historic figure; a sign of that which has been forcibly expunged from the present social order. Whether our relationship to that sign is framed in terms of love, longing and nostalgia as it is in this case, or in terms of the kind of fear, loathing and resistance that the feminist-as-lesbian image more frequently invokes, she is constructed as ‘Other’ through our active relegation of her to the past. If indeed Mitchell’s installation incorporates a participatory element, then the immediate conversations, emotional responses, movements and affective energies that surround the production and reception of the art—particularly in relation to the categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘feminist’ being foregrounded in this piece—are just as integral to the art as the more sculptural/visual components. Though subtle, what Mitchell might be hinting at here, is that the very frequency with which the figure of the feminist-as-lesbian has been
mythologized in culture actually signifies a lack of knowledge or comprehension of a force we can only feel on a deeper, intuitive level in her presence.

Victoria Hesford also explores the cultural status of the feminist-as-lesbian in her 2005 article, *Feminism and its Ghosts: The Spectre of the Feminist-as-Lesbian*. In line with much of Mitchell’s conceptual framework, Hesford portrays this figure as a ghost, rather than merely as an icon or a symbol of feminism (2005). As a trace or echo in the present of something lost, forgotten or repressed, the ghost works as a trope for something paradoxically both present and absent; visible and invisible at once (ibid.). This figure haunts, precisely because her full significance exceeds our rational, schematic, representations of her. Hesford makes use of Avery Gordon’s conception of the ghost figure in order to theorize the feminist-as-lesbian. Gordon reasons that by haunting us, the ghost figure,

> draws us affectively, sometimes against our will, and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not a cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition. (1997 as cited in Hesford, 2010, p.).

I understand this “structure of feeling” to be the prevailing sociohistorical context of heteropatriarchy to the extent that it engenders the elusive sensibility—to which Hesford refers—of a seemingly organic link between lesbianism and feminism. Otherwise put, since the regime of patriarchy remains deeply and inextricably bound to the conservation of compulsory heterosexuality as an institution and ideology, we can and may experience our lesbianism, even if only intuitively, on an unconscious level, as somehow a challenge to or transgression from that system—as latent, unrealized feminism. And while this link can be felt in an undeniably embodied way, I should be clear that it is in no way organic or inherent but a material consequence of our being embedded in this entrenched history. However, Hesford argues,
obtaining knowledge of heteropatriarchy as complex structures and forces, is a realization kept obscured or blocked off by a reified, caricatured, “apparitionalized” image of the feminist-as-lesbian. And just as the title of Mitchell’s installation, *A Girl’s Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge*, accurately points out, it is the capacity for this knowledge to threaten, disrupt and potentially transform the dominant order so thoroughly which motivate these systematic modes of erasure. This is ultimately what renders this knowledge so utterly forbidden. By the same token, I might add, it is precisely such acts of burial and silencing which also function to limit the preservation of both the cultural power of the feminist-as-lesbian and our perception of her significance to only the most delicate and least tangible parts of ourselves.

As a loyal follower/fan of Mitchell’s work, I quickly recognize the same sensibility conveyed in the “Girl’s Journey” installation as exhibiting her signature “Deep Lez” aesthetic/practice/theory/experiment that runs throughout the larger body of her work. In Mitchell’s own words, “Deep Lez” aims to;

[R]esurrect “lesbian” … as a potential site of radical identification, rather than one of depoliticized apathy. […] Deep Lez has been used as a platform for art exhibitions, parties, performances, and other gatherings in which lesbian identification is to be explored as a relevant and strategic site of queer urban, rural and suburban politics. […] [Deep Lez] seeks to map out the connections between second-wave feminisms that have sustained radical lesbian politics and the current third-wave feminisms that look to take apart the foundation on which those politics were built. (Mitchell, 2009)

What makes Deep Lez so compelling to me, is its refusal to dismiss the joint emergence of lesbian and feminist social and political identity as naïve, anachronistic, or as incidental, arbitrary, apolitical or clichéd. Instead, Deep Lez bravely affirms these coincident affective
experiences as profoundly linked and as sharing a deep-rooted interconnectedness that has staying power in heteropatriarchy. Though she has never declared it outright, I imagine that much of the work that Allyson Mitchell is doing through Deep Lez to draw a great deal of its theoretical inspiration from Adrienne Rich’s landmark 1980 essay, discussed earlier. In particular, Mitchell seems to take up some of Rich’s foundational teachings in terms of her effort to mend otherwise severed intergenerational feminist ties through harnessing lesbianism as a symbol of female connection and latent feminism.

In addition to her art, Allyson Mitchell has been teaching Women’s Studies courses at York University in Toronto for over a decade now. In a 2004 interview for a local zine, “Trade”, Mitchell reveals that much of the inspiration behind the birth of deep lez came from observing a “miraculous revelation” in her first and second year students when they first come to feminism and begin to claim and articulate themselves through a “root” radical lesbian-feminist ideology—whether or not they explicitly name it as such (Lichtman, 2004). This observable transformation of “straight suburban girls” into “full-on radical queers” has great resonance for Mitchell as she recalls the evolution of her own feminist roots which she says she conflates significantly with her lesbian roots (perhaps mirroring thematic elements of her “A Girl’s Journey” piece). She points out that although this basic, foundational, “root” feminism might develop into something more complex or sophisticated, or may be discarded altogether, she sees great value in harnessing and affirming the initial persuasiveness of radical feminism/lesbian-feminism as a powerful force, particularly in light of a trend she has noticed in LGBT/Queer circles where “gay girls” increasingly are distancing themselves from lesbianism—perhaps in part, due to its current status as a potent sign for an antiquated political culture. (Lichtman, 2004).
Perhaps my own appreciation for all things “deep lez” stems from my own experience of coming out—or perhaps more accurately, my coming into lesbian existence and identity—in the undeniably feminist context of a Canadian Women’s Studies department in the mid 2000’s, and the third-wave feminist, queer and lesbian public cultures within, alongside and beyond it. Navigating my own way into feminist and into lesbian/queer community and identity have felt to me like a single complexly interwoven process instead of two distinct, isolated moments of becoming. Entering into a community of strong, independent, fiercely political women, many of whom—I presumed/imagined—loved other women, ignited something in me, and began to pull me out of my cloud of unknowing. In realizing that something as vastly threatening as the spectre of the lesbian/feminist could only stem from something palpable and powerful, I learned to embrace wholeheartedly what had once been the very source of my ambivalence toward feminism. I learned to resist that same reluctance I later observed in my students to epitomize or risk associating with what they thought of as an embarrassing cliché. I wonder, sometimes, whether I would have arrived at my lesbianism without the tools of feminist community, analysis and perspective which validated and made sense of it for me. Such a dramatic reorientation involved the careful emotional and intellectual work of radically questioning the assumption of female heterosexuality as a ‘natural’ phenomenon and a considering of its indispensable role in maintaining the patriarchal gender order by which women remain an inferior class. Illustrative of the way deep paradigm shifts take place at the level of affect—perhaps the threshold of the body and mind—I began to experience my sense of the ‘erotic’ as if it were transforming to become increasingly understood, imagined, articulated and most importantly felt through a newly adopted feminist vocabulary, sensibility and consciousness. Without a doubt, my own “journey” toward lesbian life involved an acute coming together of the affective and the theoretical—and
by extension, of the personal and the political. However conscious I was of the political content of this passage, this did not feel like a deliberate, methodical “choice” to live out feminist politics in the way I imagined this had been lived by ‘political lesbians’ of the early second wave (who may have distinguished themselves from lesbians who ‘had always been that way’). On the other hand, though I experienced my arriving at lesbian desire, identity and community as profoundly visceral and embodied, neither did this process feel like the uncovering of some inherent truth about myself. It did not quite ‘match’ the narratives of “coming out” as discovery or as an unearthing of a previously suppressed and dormant “essence”. To me, the “deep” of Allyson Mitchell’s deep lez then, is less about uncovering a nascent lesbian essence than it is about feeling a relationship to the entrenched history of heteropatriachal empire and connecting ourselves to past and present times and modes of resistance to it.

CONCLUSION

In the this spirit of commonality and continuity, Allyson Mitchell urges us in her Deep Lez manifesto to “examine what has been discarded in this act of outright dismissal” and to “cull what is useful from lesbian herstories” in order to “map out the connections between second […] and third wave feminisms […]” (Mitchell, 2009). However, as one might expect from an artist, she errs on the side of ambiguity and does little to divulge precisely what it is that she hopes to salvage from the remains of this cultural and political overhaul in any explicit, substantive way. It seems to me that what Mitchell is naming when she names “Deep Lez” is an enduring sensibility of one particular “woman-identified experience” whereby becoming “lesbian” continues to feel strange (queer?) in relation to the socio-cultural, historically bound norms of “woman”. It is precisely the abandoned radical feminist strategic praxis of “woman-
identification” as a vital source of connection and continuity in such urgent need of rescue within broad-based, queer coalitions. Indeed, it is the very source of connection and continuity that Mitchell is calling for. Simply experiencing woman-identification in the fleeting, elusive way as I had when I sensed a vague resonance standing in Mitchell’s installation, or in my implicit hunch that my own concurrent expression of lesbianism and feminism were intrinsically bound up with one another would not be going quite far enough. Adrienne Rich was adamant about this when she insisted that;

   We can say there is a nascent feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality. But for lesbian existence to realize this political content in an ultimately liberating form, the erotic choice must deepen and expand into conscious woman-identification—into lesbian-feminism. (1983; p.201)

   Indeed, becoming conscious of a sensibility that Mitchell calls “deep lez”, or bearing witness to that which Victoria Hesford identifies as the lesbian ghost of feminism—or quite plainly, naming these feelings as knowledge, as “woman-identified” experiences—means placing ourselves along a continuum of sameness and difference within our common historical situation in heteropatriarchy that stretches as far across history as it does geography and culture.
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