“GO WEST, YOUNG DYKES!”

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Abstract

The rural lesbian separatist movement in the United States peaked for a short time in the mid-1970s. Separatist rhetoric and spaces were deeply influenced by feminist fantasy, in particular the collective fantasy that lesbian separatists were descendants of ancient matriarchal cultures. For lesbian separatists, female Amazons provided the most resonant figures in which to ground their collective identities as lesbians and as separatists. Rather than reject the fantasy of the lesbian separatists as outside of productive feminist history, this thesis argues that the fantasy that drove lesbian separatism, is evident in much of the discursive rhetoric of 1970s feminism.

Individual women and collectives founded a plurality of lesbian lands in southern Oregon between 1973-1978. Some of the lands have survived and are still operating today. Through the analysis of archival collections of communal journals, autobiographies, and organizational notes, the shape of the Amazons as rural lesbian separatists understand it, becomes clear. Through an interdisciplinary lens, and the methodological integration of women’s speculative fiction from the 1910s-1970s into the primary archival sources, it is possible to discern a dialogic relationship between the fictive sources, the political movement, and the Amazons. This thesis posits that the rallying cry of the Amazons myth provided a chronotopic device through which historians of feminism can better understand the fantasy of feminism.
Lay Summary

The lesbian separatist movement in the United States in the 1970s rallied to southern Oregon to create a new revolution in women’s rights. Rural lesbian separatists founded lands for women-only and many activists, young and old, visited or lived on the lands. This thesis explores archival writings from residents to better comprehend what personal and political motivations drove women to this new form of activism. This thesis argues that lesbian separatists, rural and urban, responded to the mythology of Amazonsal warriors and some formed their rough and rugged identities in response to this myth, or fantasy. To provide evidence for this argument, fiction and literary criticism have been brought into conversation with historical evidence to highlight the prevalence of the Amazonsal fantasy, not just in rural lesbian separatist politics but in more mainstream feminism, as well.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Sarah Thornton.
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For Darcy
“We were looking for a home we knew was already there, waiting for us: land sacred to ancient women, to be restored to our women’s culture as a place of safety and peace.”

– Hawk Madrone

Section 1: Introduction

Feminism, Fantasy, & Lesbian Separatism

In 1974, Hawk Madrone was a frustrated philosophy professor with a persistent case of hearing-loss related Tinnitus. She was tired of “teaching and city noise”; she wanted something different for her life. Madrone and her then-partner, Bethroot Gwynn, had spent summers and weekends attending women’s land gatherings and traveling to different women’s communities on the west coast. The pair knew they “wanted a sanctuary: no less than 20 acres, seclusion, magnificent views, good water, some forest and some open areas, a southern exposure, and preferably some structure adequate for living in but not a large addition to the cost of the land.” They looked and looked for the right piece of land: one they could afford that would provide space for their rural living experiment.

The women concentrated their search in southern Oregon, a region that had seen a significant number of intentional communities settled there in the 1970s. Indeed, when the pair started searching for their new land in 1974, more than a half dozen comparably endowed women’s lands were already up and running in the area south of Portland and north of Ashland.

2 Madrone, Weeding, 1.
4 Madrone, Weeding, 1. Madrone relates that in their search, they engaged realtors all over southern Oregon, often hearing a similar refrain: “‘If you’d come about five years ago,’ [the realtors] intoned, ‘there might be something to show you.’”
“Go West, Young Dykes!” exhorted the chapter title of the WomanShare founders’ collective autobiography, in which the women describe how difficult it was for them to found and maintain their land collectively. The community of lesbian lands ran the gamut from communally run and loosely organized to privately owned and rigidly structured. They often neighbored or shared land with other back-to-the-land living experiments, including gay men’s lands and communes dedicated to organic farming. Some of the longest-lasting women’s back-to-the-land communities – or what might be considered the “core” of the rural lesbian separatist movement – were founded during this period, including Cabbage Lane, Rootworks, Fishpond, Rainbow’s End, WomanShare, and eventually, Madrone and Bethroot’s land, Fly Away Home established in 1976.

Fly Away Home is representative of the process by which women founded lands during the mid-1970s’ peak of the rural lesbian separatist movement. In the United States, by 1975, dozens of women’s lands operated across the country. Many of these were purchased and operated by self-identified lesbians or included lesbians as residents. Fewer lands specifically

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7 Joyce Cheney, ed., Lesbian Land (Minneapolis: Word Weavers, 1985). Lesbian Land details the herstory of dozens of lands but is not comprehensive. Owing to the isolation of some lands, their temporal fleetingness, and the lack of formal criteria for what constituted a lesbian land, it is not possible even to estimate the number of lesbian separatist lands that existed at the height of the movement. Corroboration from a number of contemporaneous and secondary sources, including articles from Maize: A Lesbian Country Magazine (1983-1985), Lesbian Land (1985), Circles of Power (2000), Shewolf’s Directory of Wimmin’s Lands and Lesbian Communities (2016), and a number of secondary sources from the Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project reveal at least more than 25 lands in operation between 1974-1978. I acknowledge that this is almost certainly a conservative tally.

8 Juana Maria Paz, La Luz Journal (Fayetteville, Arkansas: Paz Press, 1982), 14.
identified themselves as lesbian separatist. The majority of both women’s land and lesbian separatist land was bought in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. and Canada, with a plurality of lands founded in Southern Oregon, in the 120 miles between Ashland, Oregon and the northern California border, along the I-5 corridor. In fact, so many lesbian lands were founded along the I-5 corridor between California and Washington that this stretch of road became know as the “Amazon Trail.” Although there is no reference in my research to who first labeled the I-5 corridor the Amazon Trail, it is reasonable to imagine itinerant lesbians would have approved of the label. Between 1972 and 1984, thousands of women moved to and through the intentional communities of the Pacific Northwest to reconnect with themselves and reaffirm the primacy of their homosocial relationships.

Rural separatists’ application of the Amazon label to their lesbian separatist spaces echoes a broader pattern of feminist political identification with the mythology of fierce female warriors. Amazons and Gorgons provided resonate matriarchal figures – newly rediscovered by women’s historians and others academics in the 1970s – with whom activists from the women’s movement and the nascent lesbian feminist movement could identify. Margy, a radical lesbian feminist, explains, “The image of amazons as strong, autonomous women fighting men for survival is something I can identify with and find encouragement in.” Second-wave feminists

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9 This appellation for the I-5 does not seem to have been used contemporaneously by rural lesbian separatists, but in fact, seems only to be referred to by scholars studying the movement. Sandilands (2002) and Kleiner (2003) do not give source citations for their use of “Amazon Trail.” Burmeister (2013) references Kopp (2009) who, in turn, references Sandilands (2002). In my exploration, I found only one lesbian declaration of the route to be the “Amazon Trail” in the title of Lee Lynch’s *The Amazon Trail* (Portland: Naiad Press, 1988). However, Lynch’s use of the Trail is not as actual road but as a literary device that takes her and other women into and out of each other’s lives.

and lesbian feminists’ allusions to a time of matriarchal order and powerful women warriors legitimatized their newfound political identities with historical provenance. This imagined and empowering gynocratic genealogy loosely bound the fight of ancient warrior ancestors to the 70s’ women’s incipient oppositional consciousness. According to separatist rhetoric, every woman inherited this history, but those who called themselves Amazons, or protected themselves with Medusa’s visage, lived it.

Lesbian feminists energetically deployed their warrior past as a point of identification and organization. For many lesbian feminists, this imagined heritage was located in such fantasy landscapes as Amazonia. According to Margy, part of the Ambitious Amazon publishing collective that created the newsletter “Lesbian Connection,” lesbians should “self-identify” with the term Amazon, more than the terms “gay” or “lesbian/feminist,” “[…] because [it] links to our heritage, something which I believe the lesbian movement needs for both strength and perspective.”\(^{11}\) Contemporary radical feminism inflected with fantasy propelled the lesbian separatist movement of the 1970s. The indefatigable Amazon warrior and other Greek mythological deities were ideological flares, which attracted like-minded women to the lesbian separatist movement.

An examination of the discursive expressions of shared Amazonian heritage points to the fact that feminist identification with Amazons extended beyond the lesbian separatist movement. The radical, but not separatist, Ms. Magazine ran Wonder Woman, an Amazon princess, for President of the United States on the cover of their 1972 January issue. Illustrated Amazon warriors astride powerful mares adorned the covers of many radical feminist literary magazines that were published throughout the 1970s. Lesbian feminist presses used the Greek mythological

archetype to signify their radical political position to other women. For some feminists across the political spectrum in the United States, Amazons and Gorgons represented historical resistance to the supremacy of patriarchy.

The historiographical terrain of lesbian separatism is highly contested. Alice Echols and Ruth Rosen, both tracing the trajectory of the second-wave of feminism in the United States, consider lesbian feminists to have distracted radical activists from producing meaningful “alliances” with other nascent or established political movements. In *Daring to Be Bad*, Echols specifically attributed part of the downfall of radical feminism to “the turmoil created by lesbians.” Lesbian feminists created turmoil when they extended the rationale of the radical feminist argument – sexism was the wellspring of all oppression – to calls for separatism based on an essentialized idea of woman. Echols’ further argues that the de-radicalization of the feminist movement began with the introduction of cultural feminism; the sex-based separatism built into the spaces of women’s-only coffee shops and bookstores sapped the political energy of feminist activists. Many historians have backed variations of Echols’ claim that the urban lesbian separatist movement postured as the “vanguard” of the radical women’s movement and very few historians have spent time on the radical political significance of rural separatism.

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14 Echols, *Daring*, 11.
15 Echols, *Daring*, 231. Some of the lesbian feminists and lesbian separatists own writing support Echols’ critique on this point. The article “Over the Walls” in the *Dykes and Gorgons* newspaper states that lesbian separatists are the vanguard of the lesbian feminist and women’s movement. Echols uses the term vanguard to highlight the hubris of these small groups of women creating a superior class of lesbians, which will lead other, less enlightened, lesbians and feminists through the overthrow of the patriarchy. The Gutter Dyke Collective, who published the *Dykes and Gorgons* newsletter, is explored in greater detail on pg. 26 of this thesis.
Other historians of U.S. women’s movements have tried to redirect the scholarly trend toward labeling lesbian feminists and separatists as historically and politically unproductive. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp re-examined the cultural turn in the women’s movement and in lesbian feminism in their 1993 article, “Women’s Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism.” Taylor and Rupp argue that the essentialism and separatism advocated by cultural feminism did not de-radicalize feminist activism, but rather that it re-centered the ideology of the women’s movement in women’s-only spaces, therefore creating a new center for women’s political discourse.¹⁶ Anne Enke and Catherine Kleiner have also emphasized the shift of power from ideological expressions of commonality to the struggle for women-centered articulations of identity in “contested spaces” and on lesbian lands.¹⁷

Several recent graduate projects have focused on the experiences of lesbians living rural separatist lives and how that back-to-the-land culture put pressure on the larger women’s movement and feminist politics. Kleiner’s foundational dissertation on the lesbian lands discusses six of the lesbian intentional communities founded in the 1970s. Kleiner relies on oral histories from the Lands’ founders to build a history of the experiences of lesbian land culture. Two more recent theses on the Lands, both from the University of Oregon, also focus on oral histories with living separatist residents that illuminate the culture, spirituality, and women-centered experiences of back-to-the-land lesbians.

This study will focus on the ways in which southern Oregon in the early 1970s provided lesbian separatists an opportune cultural, social, theoretical, and political context in which to establish intentional communities. These spaces, while very much a product of the era, represent rhetorical echoes of long-standing fantasies in the feminist political imagination. In order to validate their political identities, lesbian separatists called up an inchoate but familiar vision of “Amazonal heritage”: a shared herstory belonging to all women, destroyed by men, and nearly lost to the new female counter-revolution.\(^{18}\) This analysis explores the historical and contemporaneous influences that intersected to produce this vision and the consequent lesbian back-to-the-land movement, which thrived for a time. Lesbian feminists, operating on latent collective feminist fantasies of Amazons and matriarchal superiority, moved to rural spaces to begin the female counter-revolution.

In their journals and speculative fiction writing, rural lesbian separatists in Oregon imagined a past to which they might come home. Their discursive rhetoric positioned them as protagonists in the fight to reinstitute matriarchal order in the world. They characterized themselves as warriors and powerful matriarchs, in line with the warrior tradition of women-led tribes who were, ultimately, unable to fend off the “phalluses” of the warring men of Greece and Rome.\(^{19}\) Juana Maria Paz, an early rural lesbian separatist, claimed she was “[…] creating a new age” through her participation in lesbian back-to-the-land living.\(^{20}\) Whether reclaiming a lost tradition or imagining a world where women were supernaturally powerful, rural lesbian separatists projected these fantasies onto their new communities. Methodologically, I categorize lands as lesbian separatist when the women who founded them explicitly defined them as such.

\(^{18}\) Gutter Dyke Collective, “Dykes and Gorgons” \textit{Dykes and Gorgons} 1, no. 1 (Summer 1974): 2. This was the only issue of the newsletter produced. \\
\(^{19}\) Gutter Dyke, “Over the Walls” \textit{Dykes and Gorgons}, 3. \\
There are also certain performative markers of lesbian separatist land that occur discursively throughout the documents I analyze and which, I will argue, operate as dialogic signals to other lesbians within the movement.

Joan Scott’s discussion of fantasy and feminism in *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (2012) is particularly useful when looking at what stuff fomented the lesbian separatist movement. According to Scott, feminists’ use of “collective fantasy” has often animated alternative political ideas about gender relations. In this case, the collective fantasy of lesbian separatists relied on the potential strength of women—undermined for millennia by unnatural male domination—for the solution to overcome patriarchal oppression. Separatists wanted to reclaim the peaceful, matrilineal societies that they believed existed before the Roman Empire. By providing “membership in fictive families of history makers […]” lesbians felt they were a part of history. The fantasies of lesbian separatists expanded larger archetypes in feminism of the maternal savior and the amazon warrior. Ms. Magazine and the Dykes and Gorgons newsletter both featured debut issue covers with mythical female heroes. Ms. Magazine’s founders, Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes chose Wonder Woman, an amazon warrior created by bohemian women’s rights advocates in the 1910s and 1920s. It is beyond the scope of this essay to interrogate the conditions of Wonder Woman’s origin, but the superhero’s

24 The collective fantasy of lesbian separatists was that physical and psychic separation from men would allow women to save the world. The historical representations of women as world-saving vary across time and geographic space. Total separation would lead to no less than, according to the Gutter Dyke Collective, a “female counter-revolution” with lesbians at the tip of the spear. Consequently, lesbian separatists believed that women’s effectiveness as agents of political change would increase in inverse proportion to the amount of time they spent with men. Collective fantasy historically validated the political ideology of lesbian separatism.
continued draw as a woman capable of changing the world continued well beyond her first appearance in Marvel comics in 1946.

The same kind of “Amazonal heritage” that American suffragettes and women’s rights activists used to validate their separatist political strategies in the first half of the twentieth century was still an effective rallying cry several decades later. Indeed, the lesbian separatists of the 1970s grounded their visions of revolution in the hidden history of the superiority of matriarchal society erased by patriarchal forces, including scholarship and literary contributions from the first wave of the women’s rights movement. ‘70s separatists also expressed their fantasies discursively in lesbian separatist rhetoric and fiction. Advocates of sex-based separatism simultaneously aligned their fantasies, validated their political movements, and further mythologized their natural right to gynocratic rule by incorporating imaginative aspects of a shared set of Amazonian foremothers.

By taking the fantastic in feminism seriously, not neglecting to study it because it no longer speaks to our understanding of useful feminist history, we push past blaming or glorifying our historical subjects. Rural lesbian separatism should be firmly fixed in the feminist historical imagination and in lesbian history. Although feminist historians do not and certainly should not accept this history uncritically, more effort should be made to understand the fantasies that continue to drive the political and personal projects of feminism. To neglect these fantasies in

26 From Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s speculative fiction novel Herland, first published serially in 1915, to the astro-futuristic writings of the cold war era, to Joanna Russ and Sally Miller-Gearheart in the 1970s. “It is for this reason that many commentators stress the paradigmatic nature of the transformative effect of utopian thought: if utopian thought can change the shape and scope of our consciousness, then what used to be the unthinkable can be thought of, desired, and articulated. In the absence of blueprints, the future is open-ended. Therefore, it is likely that feminists employ the utopian genre as a recognizable, socially standard, transhistorical form to facilitate their social dreaming.” Tatiana Teslenko, Feminist Utopian Novels of the 1970s: Joanna Russ and Dorothy Bryant (London: Routledge Publishers, 2003), 5.
history, or mark them “absurdist” and dismiss them, is to leave unexamined the fact that there are no patriarchy-free spaces, not in southern Oregon or in the fantasies of feminists who tried to leave their oppression behind. Holding out hope of them, is to willfully or blindly recreate the patriarchal violence in pursuit of the opposite.

Simultaneously blamed for the depoliticization of feminism and charged with destabilizing feminist ideology through its political extremism, lesbian separatism did a bit of both. Separatist beliefs represent the rupture and dysfunction of the 70s’ women’s movement: a comprehensive and fantastic departure from the liberal, explicitly critical, and staidly logical narrative of the movement often found in contemporary histories. Their focus on “creating a women’s culture” has placed them firmly in the camp of cultural feminism, long derided by academics and theorists as moving the momentum of the women’s movement away from political change and toward irrelevancy. However, this analysis fails to account for the impact the separatists had on the gay liberation and women’s liberation movements. Those activists that stayed had a new legitimacy proportional to their distance from lesbian separatism. This served to center and validate the views of women in movements who had been ignored before. Lesbian separatists were widely regarded as unreasonable amazons and so, in juxtaposition, the women who continued liberal political work with men were taken more seriously. The politics of gay liberation organizations that had once been considered radically political were, with the ballast provided by separatist ideology, viewed, both within and outside of these organizations, as more moderate and therefore more palatable to the larger membership.

In section 1, I will focus on the trajectories of some of the women central to the lesbian back-to-the-land movement in southern Oregon. Their dissatisfactions with the radical politics of the 1970s led them to their own radically imagined solutions on separatist lands. This section
also illuminates some of the contradictions of that lesbian separatist life in the country. By juxtaposing lesbian separatists’ understanding of their collective and individual identities with everyday life in the country, we can better understand how fantasy drove and limited their back-to-the-land movement.

In section 2, I look to lesbian separatists’ understanding of the patriarchy as a force of systemic oppression and their construction of an “oppositional identity” as evidence of their collective fantasy. This focus further draws out some of the familiar limits of creative feminist problem solving that continue to shape our discourses about power and oppression, resistance and salvation. Finally, in the conclusion, I posit different avenues of investigation to take more seriously the fantasy of feminism and its implications for future feminist action and praxis.
Section 2: Toward Rural Lesbian Separatism

“A lesbian need not apologize for her lesbianism:” 27 How They Got There, Why They Went

Lesbians were full of creative and pragmatic solutions to their ideological, political, and organizational problems in the 1970s. (Somewhat) gone were the secluded bars and feints toward respectability of the 1950s and 1960s. Lesbians wanted to be seen, heard, and read. Although women’s collectives published much of what would become the full-throated rallying cries of lesbian separatism in the early 1970s, the kernels of these arguments were often rooted in writings of the 1960s. Activists, authors, and artists, who were also lesbians, called on other lesbians, inside and apart from women’s liberation, to come out and become visible. In November, 1969, Martha Shelley, a prominent early advocate of gay women’s liberation, urged, “To the radical lesbian, I say that we can no longer afford to fight for anyone else’s cause while ignoring our own.” 28 Shelley referred to the causes of “blacks, Indians, welfare mothers, grape pickers, SDS people, Puerto Ricans, and mine workers” as being necessary to fight for, but urged lesbians not to fight for these at the expense of their own “revolution for human rights.” 29 Judy Grahn, a contemporary of Shelley’s, imagined:

My present fantasies are of an army of lesbians heavily armed with information and support from each other, launching a real attack against male chauvinism and anti-homosexualism, by exchanging education and moral support with heterosexual women. Let’s get to it. 30

Both Shelley and Grahn urged lesbians to advocate for themselves in their own groups and then spread their revolutionary ideas to other marginalized groups. The admonition to lesbians to

advocate for the civil rights of lesbians would be echoed later in the collectively written statements of the 1970s.

The political fireworks really started when lesbians, from a variety of political backgrounds, came together to press for separatism, from women’s and gay rights organizations. In 1970, the Radicalesbians, a women’s liberation group based in New York, staged a dramatic protest at the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York City. The protest members commandeered the conference stage, donned t-shirts that read “LAVENDER MENACE,” and delivered the now-iconoclastic statement “The Woman-Identified Woman.” Their rhetoric was urgent. “It is absolutely essential to the success and fulfillment of the women’s liberation movement that [lesbianism] be dealt with.” Members of the Radicalesbians, including Rita Mae Brown and Artemis March, called on the women at the conference to throw off the cultural stigma associated with the “lesbian” label and unabashedly include the women in the second-wave feminist movement who identified as such. The Congress attendees immediately embraced the Radicalesbians’ call for lesbian inclusion and spent the remainder of the weekend discussing lesbian issues. The Radicalesbians’ zap action (protest intended to draw attention to a particular issue within feminist politics) in 1970 coincided with a flurry of significant political interventions in women’s liberation praxis made by bisexual and lesbian activists between 1970-1972.

31 The slogan was a satirical re-appropriation of the same phrase used by Betty Friedan when she called lesbians within the National Organization for Women the “Lavender Menace.” Susan Brownmiller called out Friedan’s homophobia and effectively disposed of the title as an insult by reframing the “existence of a few militant lesbians” in N.O.W. as a “lavender herring.” Susan Brownmiller, “Sisterhood is Powerful,” The New York Times, March 15, 1970. The Radicalesbians action was not the first call for the acceptance of lesbianism as a logical extension of feminist political activism. See articles by Judy Grahn and Martha Shelley referenced in notes 28 and 30. See also, Rosen, 167.
Less than 3 years later, the political divisions between straight and lesbian women had developed into a full-blown “gay/straight split.” The efforts to purge lesbians from NOW chapters and the uncritical address of the ideals of women’s liberation to heteronormative ends, such as more equitable distribution of household labor, had fostered resentment and anger among some lesbian activists. As well, lesbians’ had begun to revalue the political currency of lesbianism and some imagined themselves the vanguard of the newest iteration of women’s liberation: lesbian separatism. “Vanguarditis” with its attendant condescension for non-lesbians, and the formation of lesbian separatist groups further divided organizations and groups in the already ruptured women’s movement.33

Lesbian separatism in the early to mid-1970s took the politics and praxis of lesbianism to new geographic spaces. By 1971, small groups of lesbian separatists had sprung up all over the country. “And in the beginning, I thought that here was something I could finally sink my teeth into…I am a woman, a lesbian. After all…I’m fighting for me and not for someone else whose life experiences I’ve never shared.”34 They claimed space in many of the political movements of the era, but they mostly wanted to reclaim power over their identities. Lesbian feminists and separatists appropriated the term lesbian– and the terms gay woman, dyke, lavender menace, and amazon– as a rallying cry intended for the ears of women who were truly committed to overthrowing millennia of patriarchal oppression. They created newsletters, manifestos, lesbian

34 Deevy et. al., Country Lesbians (Grant’s Pass, Oregon: WomanShare Books, 1976), 128-130, WomanShare Records, Country Lesbians Book Series, Collection Number 269, Box 9, Folder 3, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.
consciousness raising groups, art, and protests, all designed to make women aware of the liberation possible through choosing lesbianism.

Lesbian separatists— the most action-oriented branch of lesbian feminism in the 1970s—picked up the Amazonian echo as a rallying cry for their movement. The Gutter Dykes in Oakland, the Furies in Washington, D.C., the Gorgons in Seattle, and the Separatists Enraged Proud and Strong (S.E.P.S.) in San Francisco all championed the idea of small groups of women-only, self-sufficient societies. The Gutter Dyke Collective, based near Oakland, California, discursively juxtaposed lesbians and mythology in the name of their single-issue newsletter, “Dykes and Gorgons.” In this publication, which is representative of much of the rhetoric of the lesbian separatist movement in the early 1970s, the authors qualify the Gorgons as the “extreme feminist wing of the Amazons,” the warriors who would die to preserve the matriarchal order.35 Lesbian separatists recognized themselves as engaged in a similar struggle and positioned themselves rhetorically as willing to make the same sacrifices. In major cities all over the United States, separatist groups claimed mythological representations of women warriors as they marched in protests, lived communally, divided themselves from gay rights organizations, taught themselves and each other self defense, and encouraged other feminists and lesbians to separate.

The political form of the lesbian separatist movement did not consist exclusively of women who moved to the Lands. Many of the separatists who stayed rooted in urban areas, such as Seattle and San Francisco on the North American west coast and Washington, D.C. and New York City in the east, were the first to publish lesbian separatist manifestos calling for women to wholly disconnect from their paternalistic oppressors.36 Jill Johnston, Julia Penelope, Adrienne Rich, Charlotte Bunch, and Rita Mae Brown, all feminist activists and writers, concurrently

36 See Echols, Daring to Be Bad, 230-231.
helped to establish the first lesbian separatist organizations and called for women to shift to lesbianism.\textsuperscript{37} In 1972, Charlotte Bunch wrote that lesbianism “[offered] women something better than submission to personal oppression. We offer the beginning of the end of collective and individual male supremacy.”\textsuperscript{38} This hopeful statement was meant to draw feminist women to choose lesbianism. For these early radical thinkers, separatism meant political and ideological disconnection from patriarchal institutions and political movements, not necessarily the entire removal of the individual lesbian from society. Thus, lesbian separatist identities were not tied solely to geography and, in the 1970s, some separatists kept their boots firmly fixed to city sidewalks.

Although the rhetoric sprang from the cities, the lesbian separatist movement eventually coalesced on rural lands all over the U.S. Rural lesbian separatism took aspects of the 1960s back-to-the-land movement and the rhetoric and fantasies of 1970s lesbian feminists and separatists, combined these with a kind of pioneering attitude particular to the manifest destiny of the western U.S., and created a new form of lesbian identity. Most individuals or small groups of separatists found their Amazonian utopias on remote acreages in the western United States. From the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, dozens of back-to-the-land lesbian communities emerged between northern California and the U.S./Canada border in Washington. A plurality of lesbian separatist lands sprouted up in southern Oregon. Although many of the lesbian separatist lands in the U.S. existed in geographic seclusion, the lands in southern Oregon were physically

\textsuperscript{37} All of these women identified primarily as radical feminists and lesbians. Their works advocated the separation of lesbians from the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement. See Bev Jo “Female Only” in Hoagland, \textit{For Lesbians Only}, 74-75; Rosen, \textit{The World Split Open}, 171-175; Shane Phelan, \textit{Identity Politics} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 50-58.

proximate and the residents able to see each other face to face. Itinerant lesbian nomads were also able to travel among these lands.

Most of the women who found their way into the lesbian back-to-the-land movement did so looking for counter-cultural, spiritual, or personal respite from the chaos of 1970s’ politics and activism. Many women came from other social or political movements at work in North America, most especially the women’s liberation and gay liberation movements. The dramatic decision to try back-to-the-land living was usually borne of an activist’s desire to try something she considered intuitively revolutionary. Separatism from men and a deep belief in the radical political potential of lesbian feminism led more than a few women back-to-the-land.

Many women saw their time on lesbian land as temporary, a kind of reprieve from the constant struggles experienced in their women’s and gay rights activism. “We do not see the way we live as the answer for all women, nor even as the answer for all of us forever, since we are changing all the time.”39 Some women perceived participation in this movement as deeply radical, a fundamental way to undermine the patriarchy and instate a feminist revolution. Most of the women saw their participation as necessary to reaffirm their commitment to feminist politics.

Rural lesbian separatists40 envisioned women’s-only land as spaces where women could reclaim an innate strength unavailable to them when they were working with or near men (the oppressors). This strength, manifested differently for each woman, was accessible through close

39 Deevy et. al., *Country Lesbians*, 1.
40 Many women who moved to women’s-only or lesbian lands chose to identify as lesbian because of their engagement with lesbian feminist politics. For some, the term did not carry any weight from previous experiences in same-sex sexual relationships. It should not be assumed, however, that because women moved in or around the lesbian feminist movement, whether they separated or remained rooted in cities, they identified as lesbian or engaged in sexual acts with other women. Although many did, sexual orientation often shifted, sometimes in sync with political orientation, sometimes not. I must also re-emphasize here that not every woman who created women’s only space, considered it a lesbian separatist space.
communion with the land, consciousness-raising with other committed women, and the
development of the skills necessary for rural survival on undeveloped land. One woman
described the confluence of these factors: “For the past 5 years I’ve had two passions, to be with
lesbians and to be in the country. This is the first time these two passions have come together,
and it feels good.” She had lived at Cabbage Lane for three weeks at the time of this entry. In
this way, women’s-only land in southern Oregon founded by lesbian feminists and separatists
became sacred space for the many hundreds of women who participated in the new movement.

Although their origin stories vary, we can pick up some common personal and political
threads among the rural lesbian separatists, which tie them to the history of this brief hot moment
of radically quotidian feminist revolution. Perhaps the most salient feature of this kind of
performance of feminist politics is that each of the actors understood her role differently. Women
who wanted to provide temporary respite for women participating in liberation activism started
lands, like WomanShare and Cabbage Lane, where the land was open to most women. Other
lands, like Rootworks and Fly Away Home, were started in order to provide sustained, rural
separatist living for women. These lands were often closed and responsibility for their care and
maintenance fell to those one or two women on the lease. Each land addressed in this discussion
had at least some restrictions on the presence of men on the land, but the rigidity of their
separatism varied. Each land was connected to the larger network of lesbian back-to-the-land
groups throughout southern Oregon, which helped them survive but also gave them a sense of
participating in a larger movement with revolutionary potential.

41 Cabbage Lane Meeting Minutes and Notes, 1974, SOCLAP!, Cabbage Lane Series,
Collection Number 266, Box 9, Folder 3, Special Collections & University Archives, University
The rise of separatism in lesbian feminist political thought paralleled the founding of women’s land in southern Oregon in the early 1970s. Jill Johnston’s manifesto *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, published in 1973, heralded a new social uprising “through instant revolutionary withdrawal of women from the man or the system (Man and system being synonymous).”\(^{42}\) The same year, the women residents of a mixed gender commune with residents all in various stages of “coming out,” called for the acreage to be divided: women on sixty acres and men on the other twenty acres. Zarod, Nelly, and Patti felt that their living experiment needed this next, separatist step. The men agreed to the ultimatum, and the first recorded separatist women’s-land, Cabbage Lane, was founded in southern Oregon in 1973.

Jean Mountaingrove and Ruth Mountaingrove, much studied in the history of this movement, had introduced Zarod and Nelly on the land that would become Cabbage Lane. Jean, Ruth, and their children had traveled up and down the west coast looking for an intentional community close to the land. Jean and her two children first came to Oregon in the early 1970s—her initial stop in Oregon was a Krishnamurti-run community called Mountain Grove.\(^{43}\) Ruth eventually joined Jean in 1971, and they stayed in Mountain Grove long enough to change their surnames and realize they wanted their own space. Their journey continued up and down the west coast, from California to Washington, including the stop at Cabbage Lane in 1973. By 1974, they had settled on Rootworks, a women-only land near Grants Pass that would become an anchor of the lesbian back-to-the-land movement. They eventually purchased the land in 1978.\(^{44}\)


\(^{43}\) Kleiner, “Doin’ It”, 42.

\(^{44}\) Pelican Lee, “Owl Farm,” SOCLAP!, Writings and Miscellaneous Series, Collection Number 266, Box 18, Folder 7, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.
In Montréal, Québec, Carol, Billie, and Dian collectively opened the Flaming Apron, a women’s-only craft store, in 1973. The three were intent on running the store as a demonstration of what women could accomplish when they worked only with other women. Although not explicitly politically separatist, Billie felt the women “would make choices and decisions that would be significantly different from those in a project which included men.”\textsuperscript{45} After nearly a year of operation, which saw the store’s mission expand to include hosting a feminist reading group, a women’s social workers group, and several other women-centered activities, the three business owners decided to shutter the store. They wanted to stretch their collective-living and -organizing skills on a new project.

Dian, “[had] wanted to go ‘back to the land’ […]” for some time.\textsuperscript{46} She decided to head west. After some discussion, Billie and Carol declared they would join her. They packed up and drove west out of Québec. They first spent time on the land in British Columbia, then traveled south along the Pacific coast, eventually landing at Golden, a mixed-gender commune outside Portland, Oregon. Their experience at Golden convinced them to find women-only space for back-to-the-land living. Although they did initially struggle to decide to buy land, Dian described her “faith in the vision that had sent us out to look for land to buy–to share–to live on–together. A vision of the future that never really left me all through the struggle.”\textsuperscript{47} Eventually, the three of them ended up a bit further south in the forested hills of southern Oregon, collectively founding WomanShare in 1974 with Nelly, who had moved off of Cabbage Lane in a “fit of jealousy,” and Sue, a woman Dian had met at a Country Women’s Festival.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Billie Jo Bruhy, "The Flaming Apron Women's Craft Store: An Experience through the Collectivity," Order No. MK20604, Concordia University (Canada), 1974, 3.
\textsuperscript{46} See Deevy et. al., \textit{Country Lesbians}, 63 and Bruhy, “Flaming,” 1.
\textsuperscript{47} Deevy et. al., \textit{Country Lesbians}, 73.
\textsuperscript{48} Deevy et. al., \textit{Country Lesbians}, 19-20.
Madrone and Bethroot’s aims were blatantly separatist. Madrone describes being “swept up in the dyke back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s[…]” when she began looking for land in southern Oregon.\(^4\) The extant community of women drew Madrone to southern Oregon and who already operated lesbian lands there and were running music festivals and writer’s workshops to connect women to the spirituality of the earth and of each other. “We wanted to join the tribe, the wide network of Lesbians who were rooting their spirituality in the soil […] intent upon separating ourselves as much as possible from the world the men have made.”\(^5\) She and her partner, Bethroot, eventually found an appropriately sized parcel, purchased it, and by the fall of 1976, moved onto their new land.

Many of the early founders of the southern Oregon lesbian back-to-the-land movement wanted land not only for their own separatist practice, but rather they saw the acquisition of women’s-only land as part of a larger contribution to their political revolution to reclaim as much land for women as possible. To this end, the women of Cabbage Lane, Rootworks, WomanShare, and several other lands began to debate the idea of establishing a land trust to be used for acquiring and maintaining women’s land. The second meeting of the group generated $10,000 toward the purchase of the first piece of land, a commitment from many of those present to each pay $250/month toward land payments, and the official creation of the Oregon Women’s Land Trust (OWLT).\(^6\) The funding led to the purchase in 1976 of OWL Farm (the acronym is stated to mean Oregon Women’s Land or Open Women’s Land), a 147-acre women’s land that would have a rotation of caretakers and residents. It was to be open women’s land, which meant

that women could live or visit there as they pleased. The lesbian back-to-the-land community in southern Oregon had plans to purchase many more pieces of land to be kept in the OWLT.

Although many of the lesbian separatist lands in the U.S. existed in geographic seclusion, the lands in southern Oregon were physically proximate and the residents were often able to see each other face to face. Itinerant lesbians were also able to travel among these lands fairly easily. A community sprang up in the area, bound together more by politics, shared vision, self-produced newsletters, and financial commitments than any distinct geographic boundaries.

Womyn’s Lands in southern Oregon were, and continue to be, fraught political spaces. Rural lesbian separatism represented a small theoretical tangent of feminist activism for a small number of years. However, when lesbian feminists first began to articulate a feminist politics that included non-normative sexual relationships and separation from patriarchy, they engaged practically with an entrenched feminist fantasy– one at the center of feminist politics and practice– that women, could free themselves from oppressive, systemic patriarchal hegemony, and thereby, create a less violent world. This supposition stressed that women’s relationships with other women would lead to a revolutionary shift in gender power. For lesbian separatists, biological males were the source and force of patriarchy. Therefore, physical separation was logically required and politically necessary.

It is not my contention that separatism was a productive political strategy that furthered the stated political desires of even the separatists themselves. The immediate moment of separation was violent, rupturing the solidarity of women’s liberation groups that did lose political energy as members of consciousness-raising and political action groups formed their own more radical associations. Ideological inconsistencies spring up unabated within and surrounding lesbian separatism. And, today, this ideology seems particularly oppressive because
of its adherence to essentialist views about sex and its tacit faith in the mutability of the socialized differences in gender. In terms of praxis, the contradictions are startling: separatists who wanted to save the world retreated to largely secretive and inaccessible Lands with strict membership guidelines. Women—those mothers of the female counter-revolution—were not always welcome in rural lesbian separatist spaces if they were mothers to male children.

WomanShare was one of the first lesbian separatist, women’s-only lands founded in southern Oregon. It was bought and run communally: five women were on the deed, decisions were made collectively, relationships were often open, money was shared, and men were restricted. The rugged individualist spirit attributed to Westward Expansion and pioneering in the Wild West lined up nicely with the women’s separatist visions of pioneering and homesteading, especially for those moving to Oregon from the east. “Go West Young Dykes!” reads a chapter heading from *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective* (1976), one of the first works to be published by rural lesbian separatists. So too, the racial makeup of most of the separatist movement did not disturb the racist politics in the towns near the separatists settlements.52

Rural lesbian separatists imagined they were both arriving and returning to southern Oregon to join and reclaim a lost identity. This imagination is reflected in even the smallest semantic exercises that took place on the lands. They removed the masculine subject not only from their physical environment, but also from their language and labels. They used new vocabulary to signify the shift in focus to the female subject: womyn, wimmin, womon, we’moon. Their lands and the objects on those lands were named for women and women’s culture: Oregon Womyn’s Land, We’Moon, Susan B. Anthony Memorial Unrest Home, Fly

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Away Home, WomanShare, a barn named Natalie Barney, a house named SheWings. These labels reflect not just creative lesbian, feminist, or separatist nomenclature, but the convergence of these three with a sense of historical rootedness in southern Oregon.

The ideological exercises of lesbian separatism were followed closely by rural lesbian separatists’ attempts to acquire knowledge. Most of the women who moved to lesbian separatist land had no knowledge of the rural living skills they would need to survive long-term on the lands. Madrone reflected that when she and Bethroot moved unto Fly Away Home they were “learning how to do most everything as we went.”\textsuperscript{53} Tasks included: Trenching for well water lines, clearing land, collecting firewood, repairing and building structures, clearing and leveling roads, putting in outhouses, repairing vehicles, and defending against wildfires and wildlife. For the WomanShare women, “There [was] always something to build or repair […] We are women who are trying to fix thing we’ve never dreamed of fixing before. Then there are all the new country skills to be learned–fires, freezing pipes, splitting wood and so on.”\textsuperscript{54} Much of the time of the early rural lesbian separatists was spent trying to figure these things out and disseminating that knowledge within the lesbian separatist community in southern Oregon.\textsuperscript{55}

The women were aware of the gaps in their skills. “‘Clearly the larger culture has not provided us with many models for the way we want to live, to be, to create the new world we

\textsuperscript{54} Deevy et. al., \textit{Country Lesbians}, 107.
\textsuperscript{55} Several how-to books and construction manuals for women were published during this period including Dale McCormick, \textit{Against the Grain: A Carpentry Manual for Women} (Iowa City: Iowa City Women’s Press, 1977) and Jeanne Tetrault et. al., \textit{The Woman’s Carpentry Book: Building Your House From the Ground Up} (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980). Two of the authors of the latter book were long time residents of WomanShare. Numerous newsletters and community journal issues– WomanSpirit Magazine, Country Lesbians Newsletter, etc.– often focused on sharing this kind of knowledge.
want to create. Living together we can be models for each other." The following autobiographical narrative is illustrative of the amount of time and effort required by rural lesbian separatists to learn a single aspect of a critical survival skill on the land: procuring firewood. I have reproduced the story in full to preserve the arc of the narrative.

Nelly and the Chain Saw

My first three winters in the country I got my firewood in by hand. I don’t mean my hand itself sawed the wood, but rather my hand pushed the bow saw or joined with a sister in pushing the two-person saw. At first it seemed quite romantic. It was a realization of my country dream of quietly, peacefully fulfilling my basic physical needs with minimal help from the decaying machine-oriented male culture. But, by my second winter, the romance had worn thin, although the economy and the peace and quiet of securing wood by hand remained satisfying. By the third winter it was a tiresome chore. I felt as if there was always wood to get in, that the work was always hanging over my head. I wanted my time and energy freed for other tasks. I wanted a chain saw so badly that I was even willing to work as a dishwasher to earn money to buy it!

We purchased our first the following spring. At first I was intimidated by it. I knew I had to “take the bull by the horns” or, in this case, take the chain saw by the handle. I needed to take control of this part of my life.

I freak when the wood pile gets low.

Over the past two years I have struggled to steal the knowledge of chain sawing from the male culture and to share it with my sisters. I called the forestry department and the chain saw stores for information many times without results. I went to the library and found there were no helpful books. Because I am a lesbian separatist I couldn’t get first-hand information from male friends. Indeed it has been a struggle! Finally I spoke to a logging teacher at the local community college and he offered to set up a course to address the needs of a person like myself wanting to learn the basics of chain sawing. Sue and Shannon also took the course. We all learned a lot.

But the hardest part of chain sawing has been learning to tell the difference between what is real danger and what is fear—fear due to the conditioned intimidation women have been taught to feel around dangerous tools like chain saws. I don’t want them to hurt themselves and they shouldn’t take chances. I know that when I first began to work with the chain saw I had scanty information and tried to do tasks that were beyond my ability. I could have killed myself. I struggle a lot with the question of whether and how to teach the use of the chain saw to other women, especially at WomanShare. On one hand, I know how strengthening it is for a woman to experience power over a chain saw, to understand the self-sufficiency that becomes possible. On the other hand, I want to instill a healthy respect for this potentially dangerous tool. It is difficult for me as the teacher to be sure that each woman has control over the saw rather than the saw having control over her, and to see with accuracy whether she is sawing safely.

56 Deevy et. al., Country Lesbians, 176.
Last winter the chain saw brought up the question of how widely we can share our resources and still use them efficiently and effectively. The saw was shared with five collective groups within a 30-mile radius. I found the situation intolerable. I rarely knew where it was, what condition it was in, or whether I would get it back before the woodpile was gone.

A chain saw seems to touch on many of our fears as women. It brings up our fears that we, as women, will be unable to deal with male-mystified machines. It brings up a fear of physical danger, fear of the unknown— I am never really sure which direction a tree will fall even though I have felled dozens of them.

It has given me the confidence that I can take over other traditionally male-identified work. It repeatedly strengthens and renews my image of myself as a strong dyke.\(^{57}\)

Nelly’s story is representative of the material and psychic obstacles rural lesbian separatists overcame when confronted with their own lack of knowledge about back-to-the-land living. She set about to learn for herself how best to manage the resources at her disposal despite her own understanding that she was not socialized to handle this kind of work. For Nelly, mastering the chainsaw was a rite of passage through which she was able to solidify her rural living bona fides. In typical rural lesbian fashion, she then passed her knowledge and her tools to others so that they might provide for themselves. There are numerous images in rural lesbian separatist literature of women holding or using chainsaws. So many, in fact, that mastering the chainsaw might have, as Nelly states, signified that a woman had become a “strong dyke” able to transgress the boundary between “male-identified” and female-identified work.\(^{58}\)

Although overcoming these obstacles did lead some women to more securely identify themselves and their lands as separatist, these obstacles often exposed opposing and irreconcilable personal and political visions. Lesbian separatists were never an ideologically homogenous group and the rural separatists operated lands with varying degrees of regulation. Some lands operated as women’s-only space that allowed male visitors. Some lands allowed

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\(^{57}\) Deevy et. al., *Country Lesbians*, 108-110.

\(^{58}\) Deevy et. al., *Country Lesbians*, 108-110.
male children to live on them. These women’s lands were separatist, often having many self-identified lesbians as residents, but were more open to women who were not lesbians and were marginally more welcoming of males. Other lands only allowed women and girl children to reside on them, to be listed on deeds, or to be members of governing bodies. These lands, Lesbian lands, the primary focus of this research, were created and regulated as spaces for lesbians, where other women were welcome, but the presence of males of any age was, with very few exceptions, not tolerated.

Juana Maria Paz, a separatist of color from New York City imagined that, “all [the separatists] had to do was to get womyn together and then total bliss would follow.” This vision of the potential of lesbian feminist political separation is a performative interpretation of the Amazonian fantasy that tied the lesbian feminists in the “vanguard” of the women’s liberation movement to the self-sufficient societies of warrior women discovered and written about by anthropologists and mythologists. This retrospective fantasy gave lesbian separatism an imagined, although nonetheless manifest, historical foundation and therefore strengthened it as positive political choice in the minds of those already inclined toward separation. If powerful matriarchal societies had flourished in Ancient Greece or in the Andean mountains why couldn’t it flourish again in Vail, Arizona, or Grant’s Pass, Oregon?

Paz had been a welfare rights activist living in Los Angeles, when she moved to women’s-only land for the first time in 1977. She had read an article in an L.A. newspaper about Nourishing Space, a womyn’s land in Vail, Arizona. This particular land was “purchased by one

59 Paz, La Luz, 1.
60 Echols, Daring, 231.
61 Paz, La Luz, 14. Paz was already living on women’s land when she first read The First Sex by Elizabeth Gould Davis. This means that some women who had separated for personal and political reasons had their choices “historically” validated after their initial separation.
woman” and offered “caretakers and transient” women a cabin and camping ground as lodging in exchange for money and work on the land. After brief correspondence, Juana Maria and her 2-year-old daughter, Mary Ann, travelled to Nourishing Space for a trial stay. Paz’s desire for a blissful future for herself and her daughter moved her from the crowded streets of East L.A. to the mostly barren Arizona desert. Paz hoped that she and her daughter would find “total bliss” with the women at Nourishing Space. Several months later, by early 1978, Paz was disabused of the idea that separatist living would necessarily beget utopia. In January, she characterized Nourishing Space, as she had experienced it, as “mostly a retreat for white womyn who have fled the middle class.” At the end of January 1978, Paz and Mary Ann hitched a ride with two other lesbian separatists to La Luz de la Lucha, a land for third world women in Northern California.

Despite Paz’s vision of a different experience at La Luz, she found the obstacles to harmonious communal living in Northern California echoed those she had experienced in Arizona. In her first journal entry at La Luz, written in February of 1978, she expressed as much, “Being here was one of the cruelest experiences of my life […] The devastating thing for me was I expected it to be different here.” Paz wrote about feeling like an outsider because of the cliquishness of the couples already living at La Luz, the condescension she experienced from women of different class backgrounds, and the perennial tensions created by lesbians’

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62 Paz, La Luz, 1.
63 Paz, La Luz, 4. One of the founders of Nourishing Space bears out Paz’s depiction of that land as a retreat for white women. See “Nourishing Space,” in Lesbian Land, ed. Cheney, 103-104.
64 La Luz de la Lucha means “The Light of the Struggle.” This women’s land was located in Northern California. It was also known as Limesaddle Earth Collective and Rattlesnake Gulch. Paz qualified herself to live in the collective in a letter to La Luz in January, 1978: “I realize Limesaddle is for Third World women only. I am a native New Yorker, both my parents were born in Puerto Rico. I am a first generation American.” She received this simple response from a La Luz resident named Flying Thunder, “You and Mary Ann come. Welcome home.” Excerpted from Paz, La Luz, 4 and quoted in Lesbian Land, ed. Cheney, 66-67.
65 Paz, La Luz, 9.
hierarchies of identity. Paz disagreed with “the warrior mentality” of many separatists. She rejected the “masculine” dress code emphasized by other landdykes and conscientiously objected to pressure to eat a vegetarian diet at *La Luz*. After a brief foray to try out other lesbian lands in Southern Oregon, Paz remained a steady resident at *La Luz* at least until 1983, more than once finding herself and Mary Ann as the only residents.

The women’s lands did not exist in a vacuum and the towns and politics around the lands very much shaped the character and diversity of the residents of women’s land, particularly in Southern Oregon. Although the state’s sunset laws elevated the alarm and sense of caution of separatists of color on the lands, racism was not only a problem in town or when dealing with neighbors. The lesbian feminist act of separation did not leave behind the racist and colonial violence of the movements from which many of the separatists had originated. An entry written by a founder of Nourishing Space, the first women’s land that Paz visited, corroborated that problems of racism, classism, sexism, and hierarchies of power based on sexual popularity, were enormous stumbling blocks to the ideals of money-sharing, non-hierarchical decision making, and work-sharing upon which the land was founded. By 1983, Nourishing Space was no longer in operation.

Her hope for a better future for herself and her daughter, and the frustration of that hope after her treatment at the hands of other women, is representative of the trajectory of the desires

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66 Paz, *La Luz*, 9-15. Paz found the emphasis on short hair and male clothes a betrayal of her “feminine values” and thought that a vegetarian diet was a “food trip” that lacked a critical class analysis. “Womyn in the slums don’t eat raw food.” Paz stated, “It’s a status symbol for them to have a steak for dinner and ham and eggs for breakfast.” A resident of Nourishing Space corroborated that problems of racism, classism, sexism, and hierarchies of power based on sexual popularity, were enormous stumbling blocks to the ideals of money-sharing, non-hierarchical decision making, and work-sharing upon which the land was founded. By 1983, Nourishing Space was no longer in operation.

and disappointments of many of the women who moved through the lesbian separatist back-to-the-land movement. Practically speaking, the amount of work required to sustain human life on women’s land was constant and unfamiliar to many, if not practically all, of the women that attempted rural separatism. Some lands were privately owned and one or two women were responsible for all of the work. More often, women’s land was communally bought and owned by as many as five or six women. This meant that more women were responsible for the financial and material disposition of the land and therefore the land required communal decision-making. Sharing money and work, in a non-hierarchical community, were ideals that manifested as obstacles and, as such, were unfamiliar to many of the residents.

Chief among the desires of the women who moved to the rural lesbian separatist communities was the wish to be rid of all patriarchal influence. For many of these lesbians, the exclusion of men and masculine values when and wherever possible was fundamental to ensuring “safety and peace” on their lands. Men generated the violence of hierarchical power in patriarchal society, the prerogative of one group to dominate and oppress the bodies and identities of another through political, social, legal, and cultural force and coercion. The political movement for separatism set aside alternate spaces for women to attempt to “expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female,” free of the immediate psychic threat that men’s presence represented. As one separatist expressed upon arriving on separatist land in 1978, “The men and the madness, the pain and the violence, someday they will not be a part of me.” Many lesbian separatists felt that living exclusively with other women would allow them to undo the consequences of formative experiences with patriarchal values and violence.

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68 Madrone, Weeding, 2.
70 Paz, La Luz, 3.
Those lesbian separatists who physically separated from society at large learned that the most idealistic form of separation, complete disconnection from men and patriarchal power, most likely would not be achieved. Liza Cowan, a lesbian separatist living in the country in 1978, wrote, “The gas for our stove is delivered by a man, the fuel for our furnace is delivered by a man, the UPS driver that comes to our house a few times a week for pick-ups is a man.”

Separatists, even those living remotely, still had to interact with men. But still, the chance to recreate their identities based solely on experiences with other women compelled some lesbian feminists to take up the rough and rural lifestyle, even if only momentarily.

Whether on urban pavement or rough dirt roads, lesbian separatists played an important role in the milieu of 1970s social movements in North America. Those prominent and published early voices that advocated (sex)uality-based political separatism railed against men’s oppression of women and demanded, at least within their own groups, the revaluation of women’s institutions and expressions of identity. For these radical lesbians, men’s values, patriarchal hegemony, and violence against women could only be addressed through the removal of women’s energy from patriarchal institutions. Women’s relationships with each other, politically and sexually, were fore-grounded by these early separatist manifestos against a backdrop of conversations, started by women, about women’s positions in the New Left, civil rights, and gay liberation movements in the U.S. For many of the “battle-weary feminists” who wrote and read those manifestos, complete withdrawal from men offered a political and personal alternative to continued subordination within ostensibly progressive social movements.

73 Taylor and Rupp, “Women’s Culture,” 52.
Section 3: Lesbian Separatists’ Self-Understanding in Fact and Fiction

Sources of Empowerment and Sources of Division in Herstory and in Literature

My principal focus in this section is the fictive sources that empowered rural lesbian separatists. I do want to emphasize that the women who launched and joined this insurgent movement were themselves – individually and collectively – the most powerful sources of resistance. There is, of course, a vast literature that explores the making and unmaking of insurgent social and political movements – in our time, and in the more distant past. At some point, I hope to return to the problem of movement formation and explore it more carefully. The discussion that follows, which draws mainly from various literary canons, may be considered, from a certain perspective, to be somewhat limited. I offer notes toward an awareness of the “historico-literary process” by which the figure of the Amazon warrior was understood and deployed by lesbian separatists, particularly those who separated geographically from the “men and the power and the violence” of the non-separatist world.\(^74\) This understanding requires a general discussion of previous feminist political engagement with this mythological figure and an attendant but more specific discussion of the echoes that followed that engagement. I will only go so far as to propose a dialogical relationship between feminism and Amazon myth, but will refrain from declaring either constitutive of the other. Through this survey, I will argue that literature and myth were central to the lesbian separatist project; to ignore either is to ignore a wellspring of the movement’s power, no less than its limitations.

Women’s rights activists and mythological Amazons often find each other in the political history of feminism. There is no simple causal relationship between feminist speculative utopian fiction and contemporaneous feminist activism. However, there is some suggestion that feminist

speculative fiction containing Amazons or Amazonia was sometimes published in response to political and social opposition to women’s rights activism. In 1889, British writer Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett published *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* in which the protagonist reads a letter from a group of anti-suffragist women, falls asleep, and dreams herself transported 500 years in the future to an Amazonian utopia in Ireland. The “raison d’etre” of Corbett’s novel is as an attempt to redress “an atrocity” perpetrated by the publishers of *Nineteenth Century Magazine*. According to Corbett’s *New Amazonia* prologue, the author took great umbrage at the publication of “a rigamarole […] to the effect that Woman’s Suffrage is not wanted by women.” The opinion piece was apparently authorized and signed by a number of women who wrote that they did not want and would not accept the vote. Given Corbett’s understanding of the letter and its catalyzing effect on her imagination, we can understand the invocation of Amazonian utopia by Corbett in 1889 as a projection of oppositional, if escapist, fantasy.

Historian Jill Lepore goes so far as to assert that “Amazons were everywhere” in the popular imagination in the 1910s. Indeed, several works of utopian fiction, featuring women’s-only tribes, were published at that time. In 1913, Max Eastman published *Child of the Amazons, and Other Poems* and the titular verse characterizes the Amazons gathered for a war counsel:

[The Amazon Queen’s] captains—who are women old and wild, 
Homeless, unchaste, worn with the battle anger,

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And the weight of weapons swung in heat.\textsuperscript{78}

Eastman’s description of the Amazons as fierce nomadic warriors, battle-scarred from violent resistance to overthrow by other tribes, represents an Amazonian archetype at her most defensive. Eastman’s Amazons are constantly at war, but so is the world those Amazons inhabit. That is to say, the Amazon warriors are not out of place in Eastman’s world, a world at war. \textit{Child of the Amazons} is unique among the work of women’s suffrage era utopian fiction in that it is the only work herein examined that normalizes the necessity of Amazonian existence as combative. Other works from this time highlight the great peace and prosperity created in women’s-only space that is only ever notably disrupted by the presence of men.

Two other works produced during the era of U.S. women’s suffrage retain the trope of women’s-only community as isolated perfection, only interrupted by the unfortunate arrival of someone male. Suffragist Inez Haynes Gillmore wrote and published \textit{Angel Island} in 1914. Gillmore describes the moment these men first catch sight of the angels: “If [the angels] were conscious of the group of men on the beach, they did not show it; they seemed entirely absorbed in their flying. Their wings, like enormous scimitars, caught the moonlight, flashed it back.”\textsuperscript{79}

As in Eastman’s poem, Gillmore alludes to the women possessing weaponry, although in the latter’s formulation the wings are symbolic weaponry in form and shape, and potent weapons of indifference toward men. For the male audience, the angels’ ability to remain independent of gravity seems “absurd,” “dangerous,” “unwomanly,” and “immodest.”\textsuperscript{80} After the men seduce the women to the ground in order to pinion their wings and their autonomy, the angels’ wills are

\textsuperscript{78} Max Eastman, \textit{Child of the Amazons, and Other Poems} (Hathi Trust Online Catalog, 1913), 7-9.
\textsuperscript{79} Inez Haynes Gillmore, \textit{Angel Island} (Project Gutenberg Online Catalog, 1914), Chapter II, n.p.
\textsuperscript{80} Haynes Gillmore, \textit{Angel Island}, Chapter VIII, n.p.
bent but unbroken. Gillmore’s didactic novel ends with the women together learning to walk and resist the bondage of their captors/husbands.81

Similarly, the writer and suffragist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, published Herland in 1915, a story about an isolated tribe of women who are happened upon by a group of roguish male adventurers. The actual space of Herland – aptly named by one of the male protagonists – is a land inhabited only by wise and peaceful women. These women, unlike the immortal angels subdued in Gillmore’s novel, give birth through parthenogenesis, and only bear female children. Their encounter with the male adventurers, which unfolds over the course of the short novel, enlightens the men to the superiority of the women’s innately peaceful ways, and for their enlightenment, the men are allowed to remain in Herland.82

Of course, much has already been written about the early twentieth century fiction presented briefly here, however it is notable that suffragist authors in the 1910s imbued women’s-only space with the same kind of liberatory political and personal potential that feminists in the 1970s would also grant to separatist spaces. In 1979, historian Estelle Freedman argued for separatism as a valid political strategy, having pre-19\textsuperscript{th} century roots, for American women. Freedman presented separatism as a necessary prerequisite for strengthening bonds between women in order to effect political change. “[Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady

\begin{footnotes}
81 Angel Island was out of print after 1914 until Arno Publishing reissued it in 1978.
82 Herland was out of print from 1915-1968 when Greenwood Publishing Group reissued it. It should be noted that Gillmore and Gilman did not write pseudonymously as men. This is indicative of the intended audience for the works and the possibility that to some extent the perlocutionary force of these stories would ring more strongly with the audience of the women’s journals and magazines, where the stories originally were published, if women authored them. This is a kind of limited performative politics whereby the authority of the male author is transgressed by the female author but is re-inscribed by the narration of male protagonists. See Jane Donawerth, Frankenstein’s Daughters (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 110-112. Donawerth characterizes the use of the male narrator by female authors as a “special negotiation” between authors who transgress the “authorial voice” in science fiction by writing as women and readers who are unaccustomed to the authority of female authors.
\end{footnotes}
Stanton] drew upon the concepts of female moral superiority and sisterhood” to argue for “the process of redefining womanhood by the extension, rather than by the rejection, of the female sphere […]”83 This meant the proliferation of women’s clubs, female colleges, and settlement houses at the fin de siècle in America. This included Heterodoxy Club, a feminist debate club, to which Inez Haynes Gillmore and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were both members, as was Crystal Eastman, sister of Max Eastman the author of Child of the Amazons, and Other Poems.84 These “female institutions” served as proving grounds for small-scale forms of political activism that then coalesced national networks capable of sustaining a successful political movement to amend the U.S. Constitution in the 1910s.85

After American women gained the vote in 1920, the energy of the women’s movement diffused, or as Freedman puts it, “[the women’s movement] lost momentum” when it moved into the still male-dominated political arena, attempting parity without support. According to Freedman in 1979, some measure of separatism in the public sphere should have been maintained to avoid the redirection of women’s political energy toward equality. As in the fiction of the 1910s, Freedman argues that the power women experienced in separation from men only waned when those women allowed male influence to dictate their future.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to posit an historical device by which the feminist politics and speculative fiction of the fin de siècle bridged to the feminist politics and speculative fiction of the 1970s. I think Lepore is correct to assert “Ms’s editors […] wanted to bridge the distance between the feminism of the 1910s and the feminism of the 1970s with the Wonder

Woman of the 1940s, the feminism of their childhood. However, I can also discern from the individual and communal journals of early rural lesbian separatists that the field of anthropology, especially focused on ancient matriarchal and matrilineal societies, may have done some of that ideological work. For instance, Juana Maria Paz was already living on women’s land when she read The First Sex, a kind of grand gynocentric theory of everything by Elizabeth Gould Davis published in 1971. “I am reading The First Sex by Elizabeth Gould Davis, and I feel that at last I have come home. I have found myself in women who lived 50,000 years ago. So, at last, we do not have to build a whole new culture. We can merely reclaim an old one.” Some women, such as Paz, who separated for personal and political reasons had their choices validated after their initial separation. There were other notable anthropological, archeological, and ethnographic works of the period between about 1940 and the late-1960s, which also supported the idea that women had, for most of pre-history, ruled the world. The salient features of these theories echo in the work of feminist speculative fiction writers and the rhetoric of feminist separatists in the 1970s.

The liberatory potential of sex-based separatism, even at its most wildly imagined, usually fell within material and psychic boundaries that would have been familiar to women in

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87 Paz, La Luz, 14.
88 Paz, La Luz, 14.
the long-1970s. Lesbian separatists sometimes called up an historical vision of an “Amazonal heritage,” a shared gynocentric herstory lost to women through the violence of patriarchal archival and historical practices.\(^90\) The Gorgons, a Seattle, Washington, based group, took their name from the most “extreme feminist wing of the Amazons,” the warriors who would die to preserve the matriarchal order.\(^91\) As a lesbian separatist group, the Gorgons identification with Greek mythology pointed to a fantasy that was more widely held than one might assume: the thought and praxis of many small groups of radically positioned feminists were informed by this mythology.

For many rural separatists, the creation of these lands was the enactment of the desire to create a new world. This world was safe and peaceful for themselves and their children, non-violent, non-hierarchical, collectively guided, and ecologically responsible. The fantasy that both propelled and validated this desire was at times projective and at other times retrospective. Some lesbian lands were founded specifically with the intention of “creating a world for women.”\(^92\) This vision of the potential of lesbian feminist political separation as Amazonian fantasy tied the lesbian feminists in the forward guard of the women’s liberation movement, the “vanguard,” to the self-sufficient societies of warrior women written about by anthropologists and mythologists. This retrospective fantasy gave lesbian separatism an historical foundation and thereby strengthened its legitimacy as a positive political choice in the minds of those already inclined toward separation.

Some feminist speculative fiction originated in the era of women’s liberation after the emergence of lesbian feminism. In a 1977 write-in interview with *Frontiers: A Journal of*

\(^{90}\) Gutter Dyke, “Dykes and Gorgons,” 2.
\(^{91}\) Gutter Dyke, “Dykes and Gorgons,” 2.
Women’s Studies, Suzy McKee Charnas, already an established speculative fiction writer, described her upcoming project Motherlines: “That story began with the idea of Amazons: who would they be, what would they be [...] I made up my Amazons starting from scratch, and that means that at some level I found their strengths in myself.”\(^93\) The connection between the author and her subjects, between the Amazons she “made up” and the revelation that she too possessed the strength of the Amazons, expresses a familiar concept between lesbian separatists and their speculative literature. Charnas’ affective position of simultaneity, the feeling that she was both creating a new world and waking up to a reality, which she embodied, echoes the earlier statements of lesbian separatists who were simultaneously “looking for a home” to buy in southern Oregon, but one that was “[they] knew was already there, waiting for us.”\(^94\) The lived experience on the separatist lands – informed, in part, by the fantasy itself – is evidenced by the separatists’ own expressions of simultaneity, which were echoed in the speculative fiction of the period.

In 1979, during the final crescendo of lesbian separatism, Sally Miller Gearheart published The Wanderground, one of the most well known and widely read books of feminist speculative fiction. Throughout the novel, the women of the Wanderground try to maintain their rural distance and independence from the city where the men have remained. This work suggests the fantasy of lesbian separatism in a speculative fiction work about fantasy.

Seja was a warrior—strong, righteous, brave, committed. She rode bare-breasted under a brilliant helm of crescent horns and flanked by bold and brightly-clad sisters. Stonefaced, powerful, beautiful, highly-trained and self-disciplined, she was the virgin, the one-unto-herself, the spirit of the untrodden snow, whose massive hands were as unflinching in battle as they were gentle in love. And her sword rang on the shields of men who dared to violate the sanctity of womankind. Here was no passive damsel, here none of the


\(^{94}\) Madrone, Weeding, 2.
forgiveness of the soft supine woman. “He who rapes must die.” A simple maxim by which to live your life, by which to die yourself if necessary.95

The final lines in this paragraph capture a prevalent shift in lesbian feminist political thought, and particularly separatists, at the time: Men were the enemy. By the mid-1970s, for many radical and lesbian feminists, gone were the days of (un)productive cooperation with men in order to advance women’s rights politics. Martha Shelley articulated her feeling that men in political activism were not interested in undermining gender power structures: “But the average man—including the average student male radical—wants a passive sex-object cum domestic cum baby nurse to clean up after him while he does all the fun things and bosses her around – while he plays either bigshot executive or Che Guevara – he is my oppressor and my enemy.”96

The supposition – that men were only interested in cooperation with women to reinforce rather than undermine sexist gender roles – caused many women to rethink their alliances and reframe male activists, and men generally, as the enemy.

In 1973, Robin Morgan framed the battle between women and their enemy as starkly polarized. While giving the keynote address at the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference in Los Angeles, California, Robin Morgan drew battle lines for lesbian feminists. “The war outside, between women and male power, is getting murderous; they are trying to kill us, literally, spiritually, infiltratively. It is time, past time, we drew new lines and knew which women were serious, which women were really committed to loving women,” and therefore, really committed to feminism.97 Morgan understood men as an oppressive class and held women accountable for continuing to work with their “enemies.” Separatism was the only way forward.

For Morgan, and indeed, some of the most polemic articulations of lesbian separatist rhetoric, the battle was neither the “Lesbian-Straight Split, nor the Lesbian-Feminist Split[…]” but only the “Feminist-Collaborator Split.” Morgan understood any energy spent on men as nothing short of participation in “gynocide.” These stark terms founded much of the later rhetoric of lesbian separatism.

Morgan’s formulation of the need for lesbian feminism and lesbian separatism make separation absolutely necessary from the gay liberation movement and from the women’s rights movement. The equation also created a hierarchy for women in which distinctions between women were made based on their proximity to men. Lesbians were viewed, especially by other lesbians, as “less reluctant to express hostility towards the male class—the oppressors of women.” This, because they were not in fear of losing connections with men, personal or political, which they had already severed.

However, at the same time that separatists were rallying around the perception of a common enemy, they were also busily forming alliances with each other based on the position that women’s ability to define themselves could best be accomplished by reconsideration of women’s social and political value. Judy Grahn’s 1969 fantasy that women would

My present fantasies are of an army of lesbians heavily armed with information and support from each other, launching a real attack against male chauvinism and anti-homosexualism, by exchanging education and moral support with heterosexual women. Let’s get to it.

Theorist Shane Phelan argues, “The construction of a positive identity requires a community that supports that identity. Building such a community requires both a withdrawal of support or belief

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100 Shelley, “Stepin,” in Lesbians Speak Out, 32.
in the values and structures of the prior community” and, for separatists, the creation of organizations that exclusively supported the personal and political goals of women.\(^{102}\) Lesbians were beginning to reaffirm the value of themselves as women, who loved women, and advocating separatism based on those affirmations, while sloughing off those aspects of identity they considered products of patriarchal socialization.

Informing these initiatives were two ostensibly fictive constructs – the Amazonian Myth and a more popular variant of it, Wonder Woman – both of which had circulated for decades in popular culture and literature. Though the lesbian separatists who stand at the center of this study did not deploy the term, the Russian literary critic M.M. Bakhtin’s explanation of “chronotope” seems to cast important light on what the separatists tried to accomplish, on some of their sources of empowerment, and indeed on their understanding of themselves and of their movement. The Amazonian Myth and Wonder Woman, I would argue, stand out as archetypal chronotopes available to lesbian separatists as discursive expressions of their movement and moment in history.

According to Bakhtin, a chronotope is best viewed as a literary structure or device that, when interrogated, reveals intimate ties between what we take as art and what we take as experience. In Bakhtin’s view, then, there is no facile demarcation between the two, and we see this in how both early 20\(^{th}\)-century feminists and the 1970s’ lesbian separatists claimed a unifying Amazonian Myth.\(^{103}\) While an in-depth examination of such reclamation must be deferred, a brief overview of it seems, by way of conclusion, most apposite.

\(^{103}\) My use of Bakhtin’s chronotope as a framing device for feminist fantasy is directly influenced by the explication of the literary device in M.M. Bakhtin’s “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press,
Lesbian separatists’ discursive milieu was filled with chronotopic fantasies of aspects of the revolutionary potential of reclaiming the Amazon as archetype. As we have already seen, the capacity for single-sex procreation, or parthenogenesis, was of primary importance, both in fictive sources, such as *The Wanderground*, and in the scholarly work of the mid-20th century. The concept of the itinerant or nomadic lesbian roaming up and down the “Amazon Trail” is also evident in the fiction and autobiographies of lesbian separatists and informed their identities and writings. Some separatists’ spirituality allowed them to “[sing] loving energy” to other women and connect with each other, much as the angels are able to communicate telepathically with each other. Indeed, drawing from contemporaneous scientific findings from anthropology and archaeology, lesbian separatists imagined they were direct descendants of an ur-group of founding mothers who ruled their matriarchal kingdoms for millennia, just as Wonder Woman’s foremothers on her home island of Themyscira. According to the Gutter Dyke Collective, “when the patriarchs began their brutal revolution they re-wrote the myths and religion into the most ridiculous of concepts – that of a male god creating life” and removing woman as the source of life and supreme authority. Lesbian separatists attempted to reclaim their history through fiction and political discourse. The Amazonian chronotope in feminist fantasy is linked to women’s-only space. It suggests both physical and ideological separation from men. The Amazonian fantasy draws our attention to the space and the space – temporal, physical, and political – echoes back the fantasy.

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104 See Rensenbrink, “Parthenogenesis,” note 18, 294.
Feminists and lesbians’ recognition of the centrality of the Amazonian chronotope in historical political organization might well open up new problem spaces. To be sure, the era of lesbian separatism has passed. Further, the political theory that motivated lesbian separatists’ detachment from the gay and women’s liberation movements in the early 1970s seems to have been largely eclipsed; it is barely discernible among the politics and concerns of activists today. The separatist vision of lesbians uniting “to fight that prick world out there by stepping out from the folds of the invisible feminized masses” is now understood by many participants and historians to have been based on exclusions over and above membership in the male sex.\(^{107}\)

Women of color, trans-identified women, male children, and women who did not explicitly vow allegiance to the “liberated vanguard” of lesbian feminist separatists were sometimes excluded from participation in the most earnest expression of lesbian separatist politics: the back-to-the-land lesbian separatist community.\(^{108}\)

For feminist identity, lesbian separatists made a lasting impact. By casting lesbianism as a political choice, rather than a mental disorder, innate desire, or a subversive reenactment of traditional gender roles, lesbian separatists complicated and expanded the meaning of the word “lesbian” in the 1970s. One separatist group wrote, “Lesbianism, therefore, [became] more than a question of sexual preference,” and expanded to include political alignment, not just sexual attention.\(^{109}\) Along these same lines, most of the published rhetoric from early ‘70s lesbian thinkers defined separatist identity in opposition to traditional heteropatriarchal norms. In 1973, a group of lesbian separatists wrote, “Lesbians become conscious of our own oppression and community, realize our identity and oppression as women, and that our oppression is due to

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\(^{107}\) Gutter Dyke, “Finally Out of Drag,” 3.

\(^{108}\) Ellen Willis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism,” in 60s Without Apology, ed. Sohnya Sayres (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 104.

\(^{109}\) Alice, Gordon, Debbie, and Mary, “Separatism,” in For Lesbians Only, ed. Hoagland, 32.
Obviously, the primary form of political severance advocated by lesbian separatists was lesbianism. “Feminism is the theory, Lesbianism is the practice,” went the oft repeated call to heterosexual feminists to abandon themselves entirely to lesbianism. Claiming a lesbian identity was seen as the ultimate, authentic, and most revolutionary expression of feminist politics. Charlotte Bunch, founding member of the Furies in Washington, D.C. stated, “[t]he particular material reality of lesbian life makes political consciousness more likely.” So, a woman’s consciousness as a lesbian would follow from her awareness of her socially and politically subordinate position to men.

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110 Alice, Gordon, Debbie, and Mary, “Directions,” in For Lesbians Only, ed. Hoagland, 42.
111 Alice, Gordon, Debbie, and Mary, “Directions,” in For Lesbians Only, ed. Hoagland, 43.
Section 4: Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have taken seriously the “absurdist” fantasy of lesbian separatism. Although the movement and its attendant fantasy have been often dismissed as extremist or as fringe politics, my research has shown that the fantasy at the heart of lesbian feminism is a fantasy that echoes across feminist time-space. From the speculative fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman to the first cover of Ms. magazine to the cover of Dykes and Gorgons, the faint rallying cry of all-women, or women-led, societies has pulled the feminist imagination. While some feminists played with the revolutionary potential of deploying Amazonian and matriarchal archetypes to build a sense of community and identity with other feminists, lesbian separatists took these phenomena for a test drive by projecting them onto spaces they believed already belonged to “women’s culture.” By projecting these fantasies onto lesbian lands in southern Oregon, the separatists created a new form of identity, built on a long-standing feminist fantasy.

However, as important as is the fantasy of lesbian separatism in their own discourse and the discourse that surrounds them, it is equally important to recognize the inevitable and occasionally troubling limitations of its praxis. Like so many other political and social insurgents, lesbian feminists struggled with problems of race and elitism in their efforts to reject conventional hierarchies and create authentically democratic social relations. Today, not many feminists are interested in their solution to patriarchal oppression; the movement no longer moves. Although, I suspect this was by design; at some point many of the pioneering lesbian separatists understood that reaching out to whom they thought was their full natural constituency no longer was feasible. One reason for this, of course, was that so many women who had seen

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113 Madrone, Weeding, 2.
themselves as feminists moved on and away, some lured by the promise of higher pay and enhanced workplace and corporate opportunities, which allowed for an allegiance to cultural feminism, which demanded little commitment or sacrifice other than waiting in long lines for a Frappuccino or a double espresso.

While such women were having it all – bringing home the bacon, frying it in the pan, and never letting him forget he’s a man, as the Enjoli ad put it – the women who launched lesbian separatism stood – and remain – outside such politics and also outside of the polite academic circles that took up the study of feminism. These women, like those who fashioned the most democratic strain of political action identified by the sociologist Charles Payne in the civil rights movement, constructed their own theory – call it a "low theory," if you like 114 – predicated upon the daily, lived experience of their political beliefs. 115 While the category of "low theory" might put some lesbian separatists in uncomfortable proximity to what I would call a more queer, and therefore more democratic and more sustainable integration of action and ideology, it seems critically important, given the state of contemporary politics, to reassess lesbian separatism – with all of its conditional achievements as well as its lamentable shortcomings. However, the functional categorization of rural lesbian separatism as low theory, used to inform political action rather than support more abstract intellectualizing, suits the radical utopian visions turned lived experience of the early ideas of lesbian separatists, both urban and rural. To suggest this, I think, is not in any way to dismiss the movement, but rather to ask, in light of the troubling persistence of heteropatriarchy, and the radical, if flawed, efforts to create identities outside of it, how can the movement speak today to us?

As I have argued in this essay, the results of the efforts of lesbian separatists in Oregon and elsewhere complicate the historical narrative of feminism, and not only because we have seen it as a practical projection of an historicized fantasy. The practical results, as we also have seen, were mixed: some lands folded because of financial difficulties; some because the violence and apathy of the residents drove newcomers away; and others, because the unequivocal exclusion of men and of women judged to be too closely aligned with men, created too many political contradictions to bear. Tellingly, most communally owned lands collapsed under the unsurprising pressures of self-interest and confusion over decision-making, conflicting political and personal agendas, and the challenges of rural life. One or two people own most of the lands still operating, and they maintain strict rules for land use as well as for personal comportment, and overall stand at some distance from what lesbian separatists saw as the universally transformative politics of their movement. Those persons who have stayed the course are open to interviews and, as they have aged, have sought recruits to maintain the lands – there remains a nobility of purpose in the endeavor. This, despite the movement’s having been eclipsed by an entirely new set of problems and questions, the understanding of many of which strike me as more dauntingly complex than those faced by lesbian separatists in the 1970s.

Make no mistake, however: I am not suggesting that the word, “failure,” ought to be invoked in an unqualified way. Who, after all, has been able to succeed in attacking heteropatriarchy, and to do so by way of democratic means? The point, in the end, is to be able to look squarely at lesbian separatism and at feminism and to ask, how they might be reconceived
in a way which incorporates their trenchant critiques of the established order and recognizes that we are now in a new “problem space” that demands new questions – and answers.\footnote{In suggesting this, in some ways I am following the lead of David Scott, who has argued so convincingly that previous generations of critics and insurgents, often judged to be misled or hoodwinked or blind, ought not to be dismissed. Re-examination of their efforts can open up new questions, even as we might have to acknowledge that not all of the questions raised by previous generations of social critics or insurgents were on target. See his \textit{Conscripts of Modernity} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), \textit{passim}.}

I, for one, cannot identify many of the questions, let alone point to any putative answers, but I do want to argue that, in revisiting lesbian separatism and the feminism that helped to underwrite it, and in choosing to re-conceptualize them as driven by fantastical constructions of the past, there are important literary, historiographic, and political choices to be made. For one, do we continue to write about feminism without considering lesbian separatism, and to view feminist politics and feminist history as necessarily triumphalist, the destruction of patriarchal equilibrium as its inevitable telos? Moreover, shall we continue to view lesbian separatism as somehow an aberrant feminist project, even as lesbian separatism partook fully of feminist politics? And third – and this is no less important if we are to begin to formulate a non-essentialist, anti-racist, and more democratic vision for a non-hierarchical world – are we not obligated to acknowledge that lesbian separatism, which went so much further than other feminist projects in assaulting patriarchy, succumbed to some of the very practices and beliefs that it attacked.\footnote{My understanding of hegemony is influenced primarily by the work of Raymond Williams and others who have explored Antonio Gramsci’s creative intervention in social and cultural theory. See, in particular, Williams’s \textit{Marxism and Literature} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), chpt. 6, and especially p. 110.}

All of the above said, it is more than important – it is necessary – to recall and to extend the enduring legacies of feminism and of lesbian separatism. Scholars and activists have nothing
to lose by acknowledging the paradoxes and complications of feminism. The movement refuses the imposition of order; there was no one interpretive narrative that came through from this research. So there remains the need for a more complete integration of theory and praxis, which demands nothing less than a more complete reading and understanding of the past, of older theoretical constructs and of older ways of doing politics. For what it may be worth, I see this essay as having been guided by the very fantastic tropes of feminist politics that I have tried to unearth, to learn from, and to critique. And, I imagine, only by taking the feminist fantastic seriously, and thereby appreciating its liberating potential, will it be possible to seize this potential and marshal new and more inclusive offensives.

Disrupting the millennia old heteropatriarchy—and the centuries old capitalist version of the same—will require wildly, unimaginably creative solutions. Lesbian separatism only seemed wildly creative when it disrupted compulsory heterosexuality by instituting compulsory homosexuality. Contradictions laid bare, must we refrain from drawing contemporary analogs to the coeval elements of feminist fantasy and politics? The tensions of lesbian separatism are the tensions of feminism: a movement meant to free all women, which often excludes loads of women; an anti-capitalist, anti-racist movement that often re-creates hierarchies and reproduces racist and settler colonial violence by its choice of staging grounds; a movement intent on using the mythical past to create a collective political identity.

If the feminist political project is going to free anyone except those already at the front of the line, it is going to have to find a solution both creative and pragmatic to disrupt the “patriarchal equilibrium.” Feminists will need to be critical of rallying cries to archetypes/chronotopes of the impervious Amazon or secluded separatist. We must reject

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solipsistic progress that does not include land sovereignty for indigenous peoples and remain wary of any self-congratulation for a battle well fought from which the outcome serves to make the marginalized more palatable to the center. If the center includes military service, tougher sentencing laws, homonormative matrimonial bliss, academic tenure, or increased representation among the Fortune 500, those intent on disrupting the heteronormative capitalist patriarchy should question the conditions of their inclusion in such highly politicized and privileged spaces.
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