

# **Striking From Medusa's Island**

**Transfeminist Separatism and Armed Struggle**

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August 27, 2024

# Contents

In the Ruins of Club Q . . . . .	3
Lesbian Separatism and the Transsexual Monkeywrench . . . . .	5

Unity as a principle is taken for granted by feminists, communists, anarchists, anyone on the left really. The concept pervades all of our popular slogans. “Workers of the world unite!” “All unite to fight the right!” Unite against this, unite against that, but no one asks two very important questions: unity *with whom* and unity *for what*? Unity is taken for granted as a prerequisite for revolution but it’s something that we already actually have, just not in the way aspiring revolutionaries want. Settler society is united on parasitic grounds, united in exploitation of the third and fourth worlds, united behind continuing Black genocide.

This is obvious even from a queer angle. We need only look at things like the fight for gay marriage or the end of don’t ask don’t tell, two of the bigger reforms won by the gay movement in the last 15 years. Thanks to decades of tireless liberal activism queers can now own one another and openly commit war crimes in the name of amerikkkan imperialism. They call this welding of cisgender queers to the settler war machine “progress.” Parasitism, whether we like it or not, defines the relationships between genders and between nations now.

Surface cracks are forming in this facade but by and large settler society remains united in this way. The calls for unity from the left seem to go unanswered so often because settlers are *already united against liberation*. An actual revolutionary program as such must begin with disintegrating, in the literal sense of the word, the settler nation. Separatism then, not unity, has to become our strategic focus. And why shouldn’t it? Why shouldn’t we break away from the settler nation? Trans women and trans lesbians are on the receiving end of a vicious attack from the settler right and the settler left can’t muster anything stronger than a yelp in our defense. There’s no future for us as long as we remain simply a despised arm of settlerism and put off building our own autonomous, militant, armed movement.

## **In the Ruins of Club Q**

Much is made in the online left of the men in black combat gear with guns standing watch outside a gay bar while the, now-standard, crew of rightists accuse queers of being groomers. All well and good, no hard feelings towards those guys for doing something, anything at all to try and keep queers safe, but that’s all within the same reactive, defensive posture that men’s leftism has long found comfort in. Nothing proactive will ever be done and there will certainly be no retaliation. Just a handful of well meaning guys with guns registered with the state standing outside a bar facing off with the fash hoping that an armed aesthetic will be deterrent enough.

In 1971, during the age of classical COINTELPRO and long before the age of lone wolf mass shootings, imprisoned Black Panther Party leader George Jackson spelled it out clear. He wrote “if terror is going to be the choice of weapons, let there be funerals on both sides.” Now, just as then, terror is the right’s weapon of choice against the ever-rebellious Black nation, Indigenous nations, migrant workers from central and south america, and increasingly against queer settlers who threaten the gendered order that keeps settler society cohesive. From the Oklahoma City bombing over 25 years ago to the weekly mass shootings of schools and bars by radicalized white boys to the now dominant campaign against drag performers (a group that the right sees as indistinguishable from trans women), terror is both the means and end of right wing settler politics.

The left in general hasn’t picked up on the new reality. Unlike in the 1960s and 70s when armed leftist groups flowered all over amerikkka, the left in 2022 remains tamed and passive.

Occasional extraordinary moments shake the colony: the Trayvon Martin uprising in 2012, the Mike Brown uprising in 2014, the Breonna Taylor and George Floyd uprising of 2020 all saw unorganized New Afrikan youth come to the fore in a big way. The left of all nationalities in america failed these moments and failed to turn them into any kind of political motion. Cops still kill New Afrikans with impunity, white men still rape and abuse women and children of all nationalities, and the fascist right grows and grows. Where are the revolutionaries?

A shallow radical consciousness is pervasive amongst young people now, but it is just that: shallow. Caught up in the failed mutual aid (read: charity and outright counter-insurgency) programs that have clung to life since proliferating in the 90s, radical minded youth have yet to fundamentally break from the praxis of their elders, praxis that has gotten us nowhere. Confused and without any meaningful political leadership, young people radicalized in direct confrontations with the cops during riots against police brutality are funneled into “mutual aid” groups that do little more than poorly reproduce the kind of homeless outreach charity that churches do expertly. These groups are nearly always dominated by men and are frequently havens for predators looking for impressionable young women and gender outlaws to exploit. The pigs barely need to intervene, men do their work for them nine times out of ten.

This isn't the problem of any one “tendency” on the left, no matter how easy it is to point fingers. Anarchists and Maoists, Trotskyists and orthodox Marxist-Leninists, social democrats and nihilists, you'll find all of them in this terrain. The left can't agree on anything except misogyny and “mutual aid,” ironically enough. Proof positive that just getting a bunch of disparate lefties to agree on doing the same thing still won't get you anywhere because american leftists can only agree on counter-revolutionary praxis. Start suggesting anything actually revolutionary, anything that meets the state or the right on the terrain they're commanding, the terrain of protracted war, you'll lose contact with the so-called left real quick.

That's why the crew of guys in black outside the gay bar trying to “defend” queers with guns seems like such a big deal. In appearance at least they're taking a step beyond the stale church politics of the last 30 years. Only problem is it's barely a step at all. Publicly marching with legally registered weapons in front of cameras is a show, a flashy show, but a show. It is meant to deter through aesthetics. Nothing wrong with that necessarily but it has to be backed up with something. If those guys did their little community defense performance and then in the morning we woke up and a few of their local rightists had been kidnapped or assassinated then maybe they could be taken seriously. The threat of revolutionary violence has to be backed up with something or else the right will call that bluff, and who knows how prepared those guys actually are. Without that backing it's just edgy street theater.

It's not like such revolutionary violence would be unpopular amongst lumpen/proletarian queers. There was a spike in queer gun ownership and gun clubs after the Pulse nightclub massacre in 2015, another one after trump's election in 2016, and after Club Q open calls for retaliatory violence against the right are on the rise as well. In the parlance of revolutionary communists this is a situation wherein the people are outstripping the so-called vanguard elements. Calls for revolutionary violence in order to defend our communities are common throughout community forums, online and offline, and yet there are no elements willing to undertake it.

Usually this is justified with some shallow appeal to the material conditions of the settler state, sometimes an appeal to insurrection and spontaneity is made. Some anarcho-nihilists consider urban guerrillas to be too authoritarian no matter what their politics are. Whatever the excuse is the end result is the same: so-called revolutionaries refuse their responsibility in the here and

now to prepare for armed conflict with the state. The skills necessary for waging war will not fall out of the sky one day when the patriarchal settler state starts rounding everyone up (besides, they've been rounding up New Afrikans and Indigenous people since day one). They must be developed, honed in actual day to day practice.

In the simplest possible terms: the daily abuse, rape, and murder of trans women/lesbians, women in general, and queers of all stripes will continue unabated until we physically stop it. The amerikkkan settler state is built on genocide and, rather than slowing down, that genocide is expanding and speeding up. Settler supremacists will burn or absorb as many peoples as is necessary to keep their sailboats fueled and huge houses stocked. This is the warped form class struggle is taking in this new era, and new strategies are necessary to win liberation for everyone.

## **Lesbian Separatism and the Transsexual Monkeywrench**

Lesbian separatism is almost a four letter word in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The colonial-reformist praxis of the early separatists was not only a failure but a transmisogynistic embarrassment. This is the common assesment of that decades long project and, in many cases, it rings true. As with all attempts at liberation though, it's impossible to paint the entirety of lesbian separatism with one brush. For instance, one of the earliest calls for separatism, a piece entitled *How to Stop Choking to Death or: Separatism*, published in 1971 by the group Revolutionary Lesbians, is a fairly short, boilerplate statement, the kind of straw that seems unimportant until it breaks the camel's back. While lesbian separatism would *generally* become a bioessentialist and reactionary movement, *How to Stop Choking to Death* is a work of both feminist and communist strategy. Rather than insisting that separatism would solely be good for women, Revolutionary Lesbians also highlight that it is necessary for men to work without women so they can learn how not to be parasitic. More on this later, as it is the core of our politics.

That's fine, useful even, but a 50 year old short essay only illuminates the gate to the path we're embarking on, a path we know splits off into dead ends and sheer drops further down. We're going to have to tread carefully and bring our own lights. What has to distinguish us is that our separatism must be conducted on the terrain of armed struggle. The first wave of lesbian separatism had superficial connections to armed struggle groups of the time, usually through disaffected former members of the Weather Underground. In europe, lesbian separatist communities had connections to the Revolutionary Cells, the Second of June movement, and the Red Army Faction. There was even a women's underground in germany, Die Rote Zora.

This herstory is necessary to excavate for two reasons. The first is that lesbian feminism and lesbian separatism are remembered solely as reformist projects with very little continuity with the revolutionary upsurge that birthed them. The second is that armed struggle and protracted war are still considered to be solely the terrain of men.

*For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* is a broad collection of separatist pieces spanning the period between 1970 and 1988. As a book it's an odd beast; many of the essays contradict one another and point in different political directions. It contains both the Gutter Dyke's bioessentialist diatribes against the Y chromosome and especially against trans women while also publishing Monique Wittig's denunciation of bioessentialism and her bold claim that lesbians are not women. Truthfully it is difficult to come to any conclusions about lesbian separatism *generally* except that it was a tactic/strategy shared by many different kinds of lesbian feminists.

A good example: the third piece in the book is an introduction to separatism by the Furies, a revolutionary lesbian feminist group from the early 70s. They state:

“For too long, women in the Movement have fallen prey to the very male propaganda they seek to refute. They have rejected thought, building an ideology, and all intellectual activity as the realm of men, and tried to build a politics based only on feelings — the area traditionally left to women. The philosophy has been ‘If it feels good, it’s O.K. If not, forget it.’ But that is like saying that strength, which is a ‘male’ characteristic, should be left to men, and women should embrace weakness.”

The kind of feelings based politics that the Furies denounce is stereotypically associated with lesbian separatism, along with vague goddess worship and colonial attitudes towards land in amerikkka. Yet here are some early separatists explicitly denouncing it. Still, that doesn’t stop it from coming up later in the anthology.

There are two successive pieces in *For Lesbians Only* attributed to “Alice, Gordon, Debby & Mary” that exemplify this contradiction. Aside from expressing a bizarre bioessentialism and advocating the murder or mutilation of “male” children, they also dismiss both the concept of a lesbian nation or of a future in which feminists seize power as too far off to consider, instead focusing on the “lesbian nation” as a “psychological, spiritual, and emotional entity.” This is more in line with the idea of lesbian separatism that the Wimmins Land movement left us: spiritual, bioessentialist, and pacifistic.

These authors do imagine a far off military struggle to overthrow patriarchy and build a matriarchal society, but what exactly that looks like is left unexplored. Even issues that were getting hashed out right then are touched on but not deeply examined, i.e the role of third world women and if males can betray manhood. Call it hindsight but from where i’m sitting it seems fairly obvious that third world women played and continue to play a leading role in the revolutionary movement (this piece was published *after* Assata Shakur had been captured). As to whether or not so-called males can betray manhood, let’s get into that.

There’s a lot of debate over how exactly someone coercively assigned male at birth becomes a woman. Bioessentialists who claim to be pro trans say you can see someone’s transsexuality (and i am using the term *transsexual* over the term transgender in order to highlight the social construction and mutability of *sex itself*, rather than use an abstracted separation of sex and gender) on a brain scan. As materialists we must reject this argument. Gender is socially constructed, as is patriarchy, to say otherwise is to naturalize our oppression. Materialists argue that transsexuality results from a variation in socialization, some of us claim to be “failed men,” and some trans women claim they were never men to begin with.

Truthfully how one becomes a woman is less important than the oppression we face as transsexual women (and we may have this backwards if, as Wittig says, oppression creates sex and not the inverse). So regardless of *how* we become trans women we are despised by patriarchal settler society because of our apparent rejection of manhood. Whether we acknowledge that rejection as intentional or not, the result is the same. Settler manhood is the greatest gift a parent can give to their child; think of all the white moms with boy-children, they’re responsible for patriarchal socialization too. When we reject this, not only in name but by socially and even medically inhabiting womanhood as it is constructed, we spite the grand patriarch who seeks to create us in his image.

So whether those bioessentialist separatists like it or not, today there is a whole subset of women who looked at manhood as it was enforced on them and, consciously or not, rejected it.

The politics of this are by and large underdeveloped. Many would even say that their transition is an apolitical act, a notion we reject entirely. A rejection of manhood via transition has the potential to be a plank in a new revolutionary movement against patriarchy, if that politics can be developed and harnessed as such by conscious transsexual revolutionaries.

Even old school revs forged in the 60s upsurge recognize this potential. Angela Davis and Laura Whitehorn have both commented on the way transgender liberation necessarily calls *everything* into question. The problem is we're not actually living up to that potential, yet. Only by consciously embracing that betrayal of manhood, by coming together in militant struggle, by developing our own revolutionary culture, land, and infrastructure can we begin to blow apart the fault line in the white nation that we currently inhabit. This process will change us, turn us into revolutionary subjects and not merely objects for the colony to kick around in its moves against neo-colonized peoples. If we are to survive the current period we have to orient ourselves towards this struggle, what Malcolm X and Butch Lee called 40 years in the wilderness, and begin to step off the machinery of genocide.

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Retrieved on Feb 10 2025 from <https://harpies.substack.com/p/striking-from-medusas-island>  
this was written around late-2022 sometime and kicked around to a handful of sisters who were, at that time, involved in organizing with victims of sexual assault and domestic violence in an informal way. Those sisters are scattered now, some have left the movement and some have passed away. In all honesty reading this feels like a glimpse into a period of profound change and disillusionment with the post-2020 movement. i still believe in the necessity of everything written here, but color me doubtful about it ever happening. who knows, maybe the new generation of sisters coming out of the Palestine solidarity movement will surprise us. i remain, as always, willing to be wrong.

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