

Introducing *Lesbian Nation*

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A common refrain in the on-going and now accelerating right-wing populist attacks on LGBTQ+ existence around the world is the idea that, no matter where they are, members of the LGBTQ+ community do not belong. They are characterized as external corrupting (even colonizing) influences who have no place in the pure nation-state. The history of their presence within the nation is dismissed as wishful thinking on the part of those with the effrontery to advance a progressive agenda.¹ Right-wing populist claims along these lines dictate that the nation must always – already – be heterosexual. Such narratives are currently undergoing a dangerous resurgence, but nation-based homophobia and misogyny is nothing new. For well over a hundred years, the challenge for women who desired other women was to find a ‘nation’ of their own and to reach out to others with whom they might forge a sense of belonging, whether these others had existed in a former time period or they currently dwelt in a different part of the globe. At the heart of the idea (if not necessarily the execution) of ‘lesbian nation’ was a dual process. One part of this process constituted an attempt to establish a sense of shared community or distinct /

discrete 'nation' across or within national borders through the development of an identifiable culture and transnational networks. The other part was to insist on one's legitimate existence as part of one's own nation-state, even if that state was determined to deny it.

This special issue illuminates this dual process and the complex dynamics between a global 'lesbian nation,' transnational networks, and nation-state contexts from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. The cultural significance and meanings attributed to female same-sex desire have of course shifted significantly over the course of that century and a half, impacted by historically specific notions of gender and sexuality as well as changing social and material structures which have shaped the possibilities open to individual historical subjects. While the various contributions to this issue illuminate the ways in which 'lesbian' nation has been defined and envisaged differently in specific cultural contexts, we hope that the collection as a whole demonstrates the diversity and breadth of gender and sexual identities and practices which have been incorporated under the concept 'lesbian' in this period.

Geographically the articles stretch from the USA to France, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Australia, and include the international reach of the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS), although there is no work covering the Asian, African or Latin American continents. There are several possible interconnected reasons for this gap. The first is that the concept of 'lesbian nation' itself, particularly in its 1970s incarnation, may not really extend beyond the European, North American, and Australian contexts where the phrase circulated. Another explanation is that the academic networks in which we work have limited reach. Calls for papers circulate on specific platforms and access to these is far from universal. Getting calls for papers out beyond these platforms has to take place via personal and professional networks, which are themselves typically built up and consolidated through in-person meeting at

conferences or during shared committee work. While the switch to online conferences during the global pandemic may have temporarily eliminated some barriers, international travel is expensive and time-consuming and when visas are required it may simply be impossible. A third explanation is that, around the world, academic careers are becoming more precarious while governments push for a narrow focus on STEM and applied research. Such a hostile environment leads to challenges in securing funding and, for scholars already systemically oppressed through racism and the impact of imperialism, the pursuit of research into lesbian history may simply be too risky in career terms.

What the contributions here do indicate, nevertheless, is that the dream of some form of ‘lesbian nation’ had been around for more than a hundred years before the American writer Jill Johnston used the term in an article she wrote for the *Village Voice* newspaper in 1971.² However, through the association between the title of her subsequent book and US-based prefigurative lesbian separatist communities during the 1970s, the phrase itself has tended to be used as shorthand for a time-limited, simplistic and naïve dream with overtones of racism and colonialism. Scholars and critics have drawn attention to these communities’ focus on white women’s concerns, the exclusions arising from their commitment to separatism and their failure to engage in intersectional analysis, as well as their replication of colonial settler practices in occupying lands to set up intentional communities with little-to-no awareness of the earlier displacement of indigenous communities from those lands. While these critiques of a US-based 1970s version of ‘lesbian nation’ are well-established, and Nina Littel provides a deft summary of them in this issue, the concept has a longer and more complex history. Approaching the issue from a broader geographical and historical perspective, therefore, the goal of this special issue is to complicate the idea of ‘lesbian nation’ and deepen our understanding of its appeal in multiple

cultural contexts and periods. It will consider in detail the ways in which a range of disparate 'lesbians,' utilising a variety of political, literary and cultural discourses, have forged a sense of belonging by invoking and simultaneously creating the idea of a supranational 'nation.'

In a recent discussion of Puerto Rico, filmmaker and scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner suggested that the lack of published LGBTQ+ history 'has made each generation produce its own from near scratch, often with partial or little awareness of other efforts, making the process of imagining, narrating, and actualizing a connection to a usable past labor intensive and limited.'³ This painstaking process is on display here. Through their own cultural experimentation 'lesbians' created and developed a mythology, ideology, and praxis into which they placed themselves. While this culture was only occasionally transmitted intergenerationally, it did travel transnationally, as the work in this issue demonstrates, and in each new setting women borrowed from and adapted it to meet their own needs. The articles here consider several of the resultant publications, such as Madeline Yale Wynne's short story 'The Pagan and the Puritan,' Maria Modrakowska's novel *Anetka*, the periodicals published by the Iowa City Women's Press, the Dutch Lesbian Nation's *Lesbisch Prachtboek*, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* edited by Barbara Smith, the *WE'Moon* calendar, or the *ILIS Newsletter*. The work encompassed in this collection also discusses efforts to establish supportive networks and circles such as the small literary salons run by Madeline Yale Wynne and Annie Cabot Putnam, Natalie Barney's gardens at Neuilly-sur-Seine and later rue Jacob; land communities such as Kvindelandet and Amazon Acres; publishing houses such as Matilda Graphics; and international events and organisations such as the Midwest Lesbian Conference, the ILIS Conference in Geneva, and a women's festival in Amsterdam. All of this work speaks to women's unending determination to create, reconstruct, and re-periodize lesbian history. The articles here also demonstrate their insistence

that lesbians were part of their nation's history, not outside of it. As literature scholar Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi has argued elsewhere, the Nigerian novelist Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel *Under the Udala Trees* includes a lesbian mother for precisely this reason, because this 'access to lesbian ancestors reconfigures affective dispositions to the past; same-sex desire is no longer an external invention without local provenance nor is it previously unthinkable in African literature.'⁴

Literature is the starting point here, with Hannah Champion introducing a new perspective on the familiar world of 'Paris-Lesbos'. She situates Natalie Barney's famous salon as part of a larger and longer transatlantic tradition of women writers and artists. Tracing the influence of Sappho on women's lyric poetry in New England, Champion then explores in detail the ways in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American women authors created a Sapphist literary tradition through references (coded or otherwise) to Sappho's poetry. Until the rising tide of Puritanism rendered their networks as suspect and impure, they supported each other's work through artistic and literary salons. The changing political and social context made these salons less tenable, and those women writers who could relocated and established artistic circles afresh in Paris, now with Barney and her gardens at their centre.

This pattern of writing and rewriting their existence through the creation of a literary tradition linked to place is explored in the context of 1930s Poland by Paulina Pająk. For a long time the emergence of Polish literature with lesbian themes has been dated to the 1990s, with the corresponding twofold effect of erasing any longer-term lesbian representation in Polish literary history and of Polish voices in lesbian history. Through some brilliant archival detective work, Pająk is able to re-periodise Polish history to show that lesbian themes were being published and debated at least as early as 1933. This important work mines the archives not just in order to be

able to argue for a new chronology of lesbian modernism in Poland, but also to show the transnational influences at play. In addition to close readings of the texts themselves, she explores the publication history and critical reception of two novels: Maria Modrakowska's *Anetka* and Aniela Gruszecka's *Przгода w nieznanym kraju*. Pająk argues that the alignment of three key factors – legal reform; the willingness of publishers to risk publishing lesbian material and the support of a liberal intelligentsia – that made their publication and promotion possible.

The influence of Jill Johnston and the USA-based dream of 'Lesbian Nation' has survived in the collective memory, and Liz Millward considers how the concept itself was influenced by Black nationalism. The ideas of Black nationalists, themselves keen to embrace ideas from larger national liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, inspired many lesbians during the period to think of themselves as constituting a uniquely oppressed group. Examining how these ideas were taken up and used in five key books allows Millward to understand the impetus behind different identity-based groups building their own culture.

Although the Dutch group 'Lesbian Nation' borrowed Johnston's book title, Nina Littel argues that Johnston's ideas had little influence on them. Instead, they drew on and adapted the theories of Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich in order to generate their own version of cultural feminism. Littel contrasts this 'Lesbian Nation' with the earlier and better known Paarse September group in order to consider how theorising over lesbian nation and separatism changed over time in the Netherlands. While ideas from the USA (the Furies and Black Panthers) were influential, it was Wittig's idea of subverting heteronormativity that led 'Lesbian Nation' to publish their own *Lesbian Prachtboek* to try and generate a (new) lesbian historical tradition, and to turn inwards and focus their energies on developing lesbian identity. Transnational networks and ideas still had a place, and they engaged in exchanges with Danish, German, French and US

lesbians. Like women elsewhere, discussed by Sophie Robinson and Linda Yanney, the Dutch group deployed the idea of 'lesbian nation' to set up cultural projects, including the Women's Festivals in Amsterdam, cafes, and bookstores. They allied with various groups (including men's groups) and were distinct from more separatist lesbian nation-style groups elsewhere in Europe. In the context of all these transnational influences, Littel notes that Lesbian Nation raises interesting questions about Dutch exceptionalism, or what one of her interviewees, Patti Slegers, called 'the Dutch solution': an embodiment of 'lesbian nation' which was flexible and spontaneous rather than ideologically hidebound.

The theme of contrasting national versions of 'lesbian nation' is continued by Rebecca Jennings who explores transnational links between women's lands in Australia, Wales, and Denmark. Extending our knowledge of such lands beyond the dominance of US-based examples, this work demonstrates that, despite the influence of shared feminist literature in inspiring their creation, ideas about separatism, collectivity, and environmentalism were interpreted differently in each community. Reflecting on the factors behind these differences, Jennings notes that the influence of 'travelling women' who moved between the lands may have resulted in the Welsh and Danish lands becoming more separatist than the Australian ones, rather than an ideological commitment on the part of their long-term residents. Understandings of what collectivity meant also differed and the international nature of these lands also led to language and culture barriers as well as challenges caused by national tensions. Environmental ideas meant 'no men, machines or meat' to a variable degree depending on how harsh and isolated conditions were, although self sufficiency remained the desired goal of all these forms of 'lesbian nation.'

While Jennings examines the flow of ideas and people between women's lands in different nation-states, Sophie Robinson explores their influence on other types of organizing in

Australia, including alternative family structures and feminist-run businesses. She first situates the interventions of Australian lesbian feminists as part of the larger history of utopian experimentation, then notes the ways in which the Australian lesbians she interviewed felt that they were remaking the concept of utopia in a uniquely Australian way by appropriating national discourses. Robinson discusses the practices of setting up 'chosen family', looking at the tightly constituted O'Wheels in Tasmania and the more diffuse Eggs in mainland Australia. She also reviews the way in which one woman, DQ, saw continuity over time: her experiences in the 1970s utopian land-based community provided the foundation for entrepreneurial activities in the 1980s, through Matilda Graphics and the Women's Services Repairs Project, both in Sydney.

Taking the tale of lesbian nation as a concept into the 1990s, Ann Wilson uses organisational records, personal papers, and press accounts to show the relationship between the nation-state and transnational networks in her study of the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS). She combines extraordinary breadth with insightful depth in her discussion of the influence of Dutch lesbians on the direction taken by what was, in effect, a global version of lesbian nation. However, while the Dutch lesbians were uniquely situated to be able to build an international lesbian network, they were unsuccessful at managing conflicts over racism. She shows the background which led to the ILIS negotiating the demands of two different trajectories: the development of lesbian culture and the practical collaborations with gay men's organisations in advancing international political projects. The scope of activism was extensive: in addition to letter writing and money raising campaigns, the Dutch ILIS members were able to get a Dutch Secretary of State to raise the question of lesbian rights at the UN in 1985. Although the ILIS maintained grassroots organising practices into the 1990s, it failed to tackle racism and

its bureaucratic links to the progressive nation-state limited the possibilities for lesbians of colour to organise autonomously.

Finally, Linda J. Yanney provides a personal account of the influence of Johnston and the creation of a vibrant and energetic version of ‘lesbian nation’ in the ‘flyover zone’ of Iowa State, well outside the usual hotbeds of lesbian feminist activism such as New York City. As unofficial historian of Iowa City’s lesbian feminist community, Yanney’s insightful review of the vibrant activities undertaken in the 1970s is an invaluable way to situate the personal in the wider political context. It effectively conveys the dynamic relationship between the practice of living lesbian feminist politics and the creation of lesbian culture.

What emerges through the work presented in this special issue is that the history of ‘lesbian nation’ is always both transnational and national, and it has never been a simple case of one American author igniting a global fire. These articles collectively illuminate the complex ways in which the literature of a Sapphist tradition and, more recently, ‘lesbian’ as a modern political, social, cultural and erotic identity travelled through texts, culture, and in bodies between nations. While the majority of the lesbians discussed here focused their energies within the networks and circles of lesbian literary and political tradition, they were also influenced by and embraced other ideas circulating around them. The decadent poets in France, lyric poetry in the USA, a network of liberal intellectual publishers in Poland, Black Nationalism and Black Power in the USA and elsewhere, post-68 feminism, environmentalism, gay men’s liberation movements (the COG and IGA), as well as international formal institutions such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations are all represented. At the same time, the context-specific creation of something akin to ‘lesbian nation’ is part of those larger stories too.

More significant, perhaps, is the contested relationship between ‘lesbian nation’ and the nation-state. Pająk, Littel and Wilson all consider the role of lesbians in the nation, not in the more familiar terms of legislative change, but rather in terms of national narratives: the presence of a Polish lesbian modernism from decades ago which had been lost to the collective memory, and Dutch exceptionalism which made lesbians exemplary citizens on the international stage. For the settler colonial states of the USA and Australia the articles here have begun the process of engaging with the role of lesbians in perpetuating colonial violence through creating settlements on colonised lands, sometimes using romanticised versions of indigenous epistemologies to imagine an alternative to patriarchal capitalism without serious engagement with indigenous communities themselves. While earlier scholarship on this topic has tended to focus more on the practical experiences of living their politics, the articles here begin to build on the work of scholars such as Katherine Schweighofer to consider where attempts to create land-based ‘lesbian nation’ fit in the history of colonialism and postcolonial resistance.⁵ This fresh approach is made possible (in part) by the reflections of interviewees who are themselves re-considering and reflecting on their past in the context, now, of truth and reconciliation commissions and more widespread acknowledgement of colonial history.

This collection works on two levels. On the one hand, it reminds us of how quickly lesbian histories are lost or over simplified, and that each generation of historians, creatives, and women looking for a sense of belonging have to uncover what links were made by those who came before them. On the other, the scholarship here also demonstrates that while those who see themselves as part of a larger body that can be called ‘lesbian’ may stake a claim to a long transnational tradition, they are also adept at adapting to the specific national and historical context.

¹ See, for example, Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff, ‘Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 4 (2018): 797-821.

² Jill Johnston, *Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years (1970-75)* (London: Serpent’s Tail Press, 1998), ix.

³ Frances Negrón-Muntaner, ““Can You Imagine?” Puerto Rican Lesbian Activisms, 1972-1991’, *Centro Journal* XXX, no. 11 (2018): 350.

⁴ Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, ‘The Promise of Lesbians in African Literary History’, *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 45, no. 4 (2018): 684.

⁵ Katherine Schweighofer, ‘A land of one’s own: whiteness and indigeneity on lesbian land’, *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2018): 489-506.