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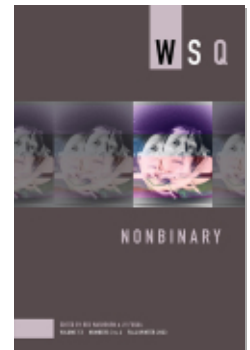
Generations of Ex-lovers Cannot Fail: Rethinking Lesbian Feminism Today

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Generations of Ex-lovers Cannot Fail: Rethinking Lesbian Feminism Today

Cait McKinney's *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020

Rox Samer's *Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022

Jack Jen Giesecking

Executive Director Sarah Chinn of the (then) Center of Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS)¹ co-organized the Lesbians in the 1970s conference in 2010 to “commemorate, celebrate, and evaluate the diverse contributions of lesbians over the course of the 1970s” (Chinn 2011). In her *CLAGSNews* newsletter retrospective, Chinn delightedly records that hopeful estimates for 250 registrants were surpassed with 450 attendees(!) “filling the halls of the [CUNY] Graduate Center with more lesbians than the building has ever seen and most likely ever will see!” She adds how exciting it was that paper proposals “came from younger women (and a couple of men), who were engaging lesbian experiences in the 1970s as meaningful topics for academic study and political analysis.” Over a decade later, academic work about 1970s lesbian feminism has finally begun to accumulate—by an ever more diversely gendered authorship—including the publication of two central, insightful texts: Cait McKinney’s *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* and Rox Samer’s *Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s*.

These books fit together; they are complementary texts. Both argue against limiting notions of lesbian feminism as any fixed, certain framework or as defined by any one group of people. Both authors write against any claim to lesbian feminism by trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). Instead, lesbian feminism is multitudinous and malleable—in fact, what is lesbian (or the 1970s-style of capitalized Lesbian) is still being constructed and will be constructed again. Both books draw on new archives and texts and rethink previously studied materials in important ways, and both are packed with readable, powerful prose from which to rethink, reimagine, write, and teach about lesbians in the 1970s. While the authors do bring in

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race and disability and provide significant theorizing around both concepts, the most significant shared weakness is the uneven attention both books pay to these positionalities, whereby some areas are stronger than others.

Published in 2020, McKinney's *Information Activism*, a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award, does the profound work of turning lesbian information-making and -sharing into an utterly invigorating read. The book's principal concept, "information activism," is the work of "women who responded to their frustrated desire for information about lesbian history and lesbian life by generating that information themselves" and thus produced "how movement-related information is stored, sorted, searched for, and retrieved by lesbian-feminist activists serving communities they care about" (2, 13). In other words, McKinney traces how this "not-so-sexy shuffling of documents . . . about sex and sexuality" was a practice of information activism (9). This massive effort was a project of survival, connection, and self-understanding and collective insight.

Bridging the emergence of 1970s lesbian feminist media with the shifts to 1980s lesbian database creation and maintenance, computer use, and software selection, McKinney frames their *Information Activism* through the production of lesbian information infrastructure, which also will be of interest to infrastructure studies. The first of the book's four core chapters focuses on that most popular of lesbian documents, newsletters, the "connective tissue that made readers aware of the larger information infrastructure" (35). The following chapters examine phone hotlines, indices, and, finally, the digitization practices of lesbian archival materials. McKinney is especially enthralled with—and good at—making visible the labor of lesbian information-making. Even as an expert in this area, I was repeatedly wowed by how little access lesbians had to the positive, accessible, and organized information that we could so easily rely on by the twenty-first century, even before search engines, thanks to amateur-cum-professional archivists and librarians and activists.

McKinney's book pays homage to the many excellent books that have examined lesbian print culture before it, like Agatha Beins's (2017) *Liberation in Print: Feminist Periodicals and Social Movement Identity*. The first chapter in *Information Activism*, "The Internet That Lesbians Built: Newsletter Networks," dives into not just the arguments and ideas of the newsletters but also how their mutual precarity and interdependence served to turn what seemed like nothing (from people told they were not worthy) into so much infrastructure. The next chapter turns to the nightly call records, including

the “trolls,” and marginalia (“a treasure trove of doodles, jokes, idiosyncratic handwriting, and notes passed among volunteers”) of the Lesbian Switchboard phone hotline, which connected callers with information, people, and places to make sense of their own lives. Here, McKinney aims to unpack “what kinds of media practices are remembered, or *rememberable*, within feminist archives,” beyond print practices alone (69, emphasis in the original). Much of the book also tends to the emotional and affective work of producing care through these networking practices, like in the third chapter on *The Lesbian Periodicals Index* (Potter 1986) and *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (Roberts 1981), which relay how “lesbian indexers worked as benevolent infiltrators within conditions of gendered, racialized, and technological exclusion from control over information” (122). Still, McKinney notes, many efforts toward anti-racism failed through the ways the “white lesbian-feminist economy” privileged “middle class ideals of sisterhood without difference” (120).

The final chapter’s reveal of the slow and careful archival work of digitizing many of the Lesbian Herstory Archives’ materials pays special attention to the way names, genders, and pronouns shift for those recorded in, organizing, and tending these materials. “Making this infrastructure together, bit by bit, materializes a desire for history and gives life to lesbian feminism,” because, as McKinney also notes, “these activists needed to be able to easily revise how they were describing political and identity-laden materials in databases in order to be sensitive to shifting community values” (44, 11). The text is a strong contribution to feminist media studies, communication studies, and lesbian feminist queer trans theory more broadly.

Now, let’s dish on *Lesbian Potentiality*. The potentiality of what “lesbian” is, was, and yet could be (or vice versa) derives from the dream of the wide range of lesbian feminists: the “potential that gendered and sexual life could and would someday be substantially different, that heteropatriarchy may topple, and that women would be the ones to topple it” (227). “Lesbian potentiality” is a theoretical concept as well as a way of operating in the world that builds from and contributes to queer trans feminist theory. Lesbian potentiality does the work of “connecting potentialities past and present [in a way] that neither obfuscates nor reifies their differences” and illuminates “social movement history that also attends to its privations—the what was *and* the what could have been” (7).

A film scholar, Samer especially draws on audience studies to frame their arguments across the book by placing chapters on film and science fiction

side by side, an unusual, energizing pairing. Samer argues that what functions under the “lesbian sign” did its “most robust work in feminist media . . . cultures of the second half of the 1970s” (2). Lesbian potentiality and its counterpart, “impotentiality,” persist as a method for all those committed to social change in the integral work of “not knowing what will come of the actions taken at its end and includes the possibility of expanding or dampening momentum” (227). In the end, these insights are clearly not just a feminist and queer contribution but, more so, should be read as a stunningly trans critique.

The writing of the core chapters becomes progressively more captivating throughout, and the chapters read together well, though they each will also draw specific audiences. The author’s writing brings even the most recently converted sci-fi and avant-garde neophyte (I wave) up to speed quickly. After a devastatingly delicious theoretical mic drop of an introduction, the first two chapters examine a selection of 1970s feminist experimental and documentary films. This introduction is a must-read regarding how temporality and possibility shape lesbian, queer, trans, and feminist thinking.

The first chapter looks at feminist experimental films, including video newsletters sent from feminists between cities. The next chapter, “Producing Freedom,” is on prisoner and ex-prisoner documentaries set in, and just out of, women’s prisons. Prison studies scholars get a rare glimpse into post-Attica uprising experiences from women’s perspectives. The third chapter, “Raising Fannish Consciousness,” provides a riveting account of the ways that 1970s feminist science fiction (SF) fanzines and conferences (featuring the likes of Joanna Russ and Samuel Delany, among others) created new models of feminist communication and self-understanding and collective insight that helped to define (lesbian) feminist correspondence and understandings of the self as (lesbian) feminist.

My favorite chapter comes last. With all the emphasis I can put on a page: “Tip/Alli: Cutting a Transfeminist Genealogy of Siblinghood” belongs as a reading on every Intro to GWS/S, Trans, Feminist, Gender, Sexuality, etc. Studies course out there. Samer relays a new gendered or trans reading of the seemingly well-known outing story of one of 1970s feminist SF’s most famous authors, James Tiptree Jr., who was in fact Alice B. Sheldon and who later identified as a Lesbian (*L* intended). In their nuanced exploration of Tip/Alli’s multitudinous gender—primarily focusing on their slash signature, which the author used to pair their pseudonym or alternate and birth identities—Samer puts forth a “transfeminist genealogy” that emerges in

the embrace of “trans women as sisters,” going on to write that “all trans people as siblings is in fact very much in line with 1970s feminism. It does not matter where you cut the lines and how you can join them afterward.” In other words, feminists and trans people alike can turn to the past not only for their own well-being or self-knowledge “but for a history of the reimagination of gender and sexual existence, which we might in turn pass along” (184).

I enjoyed when the authors discussed their own experiences in the archives, where we are suddenly witnessing the immeasurable lesbian force through them instead of in the materials alone. So, here I add my own lesbian tale: as one of the still small realm of lesbian queer trans feminist scholars, I want to note that I am colleague and friend to both authors. I review these books because in their texts they both helped me drastically redraw what a lesbian, a trans person, and any gendered being is, was, and could be. As a CUNY Graduate Center student writing a dissertation on lesbian and queer spaces from the 1980s through the 2000s, Chinn invited me to organize a panel on Lesbian Spaces in the 1970s as part of that 2010 conference.² Looking back on the long, lively, and packed panel Q&A (with an audience mostly over the age of sixty), my notes make no mention of audience claims of anger about trans presences in lesbian feminist debates (including my own at the table)—and, oh, was I worried—but instead I recorded the range of lesbians in the audience who sought to have their labor and materials accounted for. In *Information Activism* and *Lesbian Potentiality*, the range of lesbian identities and the objects they left behind are increasingly getting their due, as these authors shed light on worlds already, and still, and again not yet imagined.

Jack Jen Giesecking is a research fellow at Five College Women’s Studies Research Center. Their first book is *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbian, Dykes, and Queers* (NYU Press, 2020). He is presently writing their next book, *Dyke Bars*: Queer Spaces for the End Times*. She can be found at jgieseking.org or jgiesek@mtholyoke.edu.

Notes

1. CLAGS is now the Center for LGBTQ Studies.
2. The panel included Madelyn Davis, Deb Edel, Julie Enszer, and Stina Soderling.

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