

STEPIN FETCHIT WOMAN

by Martha Shelley

Lesbianism is one road to freedom — freedom from oppression by men.

To see lesbianism in this context — as a mode of being neither better nor worse than others, as one which offers its own opportunities — one must abandon the notion that deviance from the norm arises from personal excess.

It is generally accepted that America is a "sick society." There is an inevitable corollary to this statement, which has not been generally accepted: that people without our society are all crippled by virtue of being forced to conform to certain norms. (Those who conform most easily can be seen as either the most healthy, because adaptable, or most sick because least spirited.) The black struggling to free himself not only from white oppression, but from the sickness of self-contempt and the sickness he has been forced to play. Women are struggling to liberate their minds from sick sexual roles. It is clear that the self-abasing, suffering, shuffling black is not someone with a personal neurosis, but society's victim — someone who has been forced to learn certain techniques for survival. Few people understand that the same rule of the self-abnegating passive housewife. Fewer understand this truth about the homosexual.

These techniques of survival help us meet certain demands, at the expense of others.

For women, as for other groups, there are several American norms. All of them have their rewards — and their penalties. The nice girl next door, virginal until her marriage — the Miss America type — is rewarded with immunity respect and respectability. She loses her individuality and her freedom to become a toothpaste tube and a chastity belt. The career woman gains independence and a larger margin of freedom — if she is willing to work twice as hard as a man for less pay, and if she cope with emotional strains similar to those that beset the black intellectual surrounded by white colleagues. The starlet, call-girl, or bunny whose source of income is directly related to her image as a sex object, gains some financial independence and freedom from housework.

The housewife doesn't have to work as hard as the career woman, but she pays through psychological degradation as a sex object, and through the insecurity of knowing that her career — based on youthful good looks — is short-lived.

The lesbian, through her ability to obtain love and sexual satisfaction from other women, is freed of dependence on men for love, sex and money. She does not have to do menial chores for them (at least at home), nor cater to their egos, nor submit to hasty and inept sexual encounters. She is freed from fear of unwanted pregnancy and the pains of childbirth, and from the drudgery of child-raising.

On the other hand, she pays three penalties. The rewards of child raising are denied her. This is a great loss for some women, but not for others. Few women abandon their children, as compared with the multitudes of men who abandon both wives and children. Few men have much interest in the process of child raising. One expects that it might not be much fun for the average man, and so the men leave it to the women.

The lesbian must compete with men in the job market, facing the same job and salary discrimination as her straight sister. On the other hand, she has more of a chance of success since her career is not interrupted by childbirth.

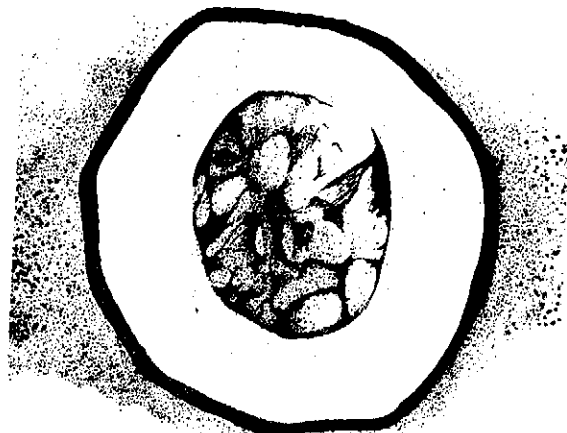
Finally, she faces the most severe contempt and ridicule that society can heap on a woman.

A year ago, when Women's Liberation picketed the 1968 Miss America pageant, the most terrible epithet heaped on our straight sisters was "lesbian". The sisters addressed hostile audiences who called them "commies," "amps," "bathless," etc., and they faced these labels with equanimity; but they broke into tears when they were called lesbians. When a woman showed up at a feminist meeting and announced that she was a lesbian, many men avoided her. Others told her to keep her mouth shut, for fear that she would endanger the cause. They thought that men could be persuaded to accept some measure of equality for women — as long as these women would parade their devotion to heterosexuality and thehood.

A woman who is totally independent of men — who obtains love, sex and self-esteem from other women — is a terrible threat to male supremacy. She doesn't need them, and therefore they have very little power over her.

I have met many, many feminists who were not lesbians — but I have never met a lesbian who was not a feminist. Straight women by the millions have been sold the belief that they must subordinate themselves to men, accept less pay for equal work, and do all the shit work around the house. I have met straight women who would die to preserve their chains. I have never met a lesbian who believed that she was innately less rational or capable than a man; who swallowed one word of the "woman's role" horseshit.

Lesbians, because they are not afraid of being abandoned by men, are less reluctant to express hostility towards the male class — the oppressors of women. Hostility towards your oppressor is healthy — but the guardians of modern morality, the psychiatrists, have interpreted this hostility as an illness, and they say this illness causes and is lesbianism.



If hostility to men causes lesbianism, then it seems to me that in a male-dominated society, lesbianism is a sign of mental health.

The psychiatrists have also forgotten that lesbianism involves love between women. Isn't love between equals healthier than sucking up to an oppressor? And when they claim we aren't capable of loving men, even if we want to — I ask you, straight man, are you capable of loving another man so deeply that you aren't afraid of his body or afraid to put your body in his hands? Are you really capable of loving women, or is your sexuality just another expression of your hostility? Is it an act of love or sexual conquest? An act of sexual imperialism?

I do not mean to condemn all males. I have found some beautiful, loving men among the revolutionaries, among the hippies, and the male homosexuals. 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 — and he is my oppressor and my enemy.

Society has taught most lesbians to believe that they are sick and has taught most straight women to despise and fear the lesbian as a perverted, diseased creature. It has fostered the myth that lesbians are ugly and turn to each other because they can't get that prize, that prince, a male! In this age of the new "sexual revolution", another myth has been fostered — the beautiful lesbians who play games with each other on the screen for the titillation of heterosexual males. They are not seen as serious people in love — but as performers in the "let's try a new perversion" game.

Freud founded the myth of penis envy, and men have asked me, "But what can two women do together?" As though a penis were the *sine qua non* of sexual pleasure! Man, we can do without it, and keep it going longer, too!

Women are afraid to be without a man's protection — because other men will assault them on the streets. And this is no accident, not an aberration performed by a few lunatics. Assaults on women are no more an accident than are lynchings of blacks in Mississippi. Men have oppressed us, and like most oppressors, they hate the oppressed and fear their wrath. Watch a white man walking in Harlem and you will see what I mean. Look at the face of a man who has accidentally wandered into a lesbian bar.

Men fear lesbians because they are less dependent, and because their hostility is less controlled.

Straight women fear lesbians because of the lesbian inside them, because we represent an alternative. They fear us for the same reasons that uptight middle class people fear hip people. They are angry at us because we have a way out that they are afraid to take.

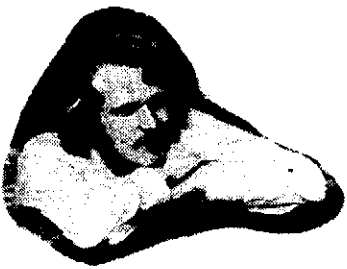
And what happens to the lesbian under all this pressure? Many of my sisters, confused by the barrage of anti-gay propaganda, have spent years begging to be allowed to live. They have come begging because they believed they were psychic cripples, and that other people were healthy and had the moral right to judge them. Many have lived in silence, burying themselves in their careers, like name-changing Jews and blacks who passed for white. Many have retreated into an apolitical domesticity, concerning themselves only with the attempt to maintain a love relationship in a society which attempts to destroy love and replace it with consumer goods — flowers, mouthwashes, diamond rings, automobiles — and which attempts to completely destroy any form of love outside the monogamous marriage.

This, by the way, is an important point for all kinds of revolutionaries. If you love your brother, you are less willing to stand by and watch him get crushed under the relentless pressures of the rat race, of the doctor bills and the furniture bills. If you love your brother, you won't try to swindle him. Restricting love to the immediate family group isolates each family from the community — each ethnic group from the others — and makes all these isolated frightened people more willing to settle for fancy furniture on the installment plan, for grudgingly bestowed respectability, because they can't get the real thing, real love.

To return to the lesbian — because *lesbian* has become such a vile epithet, we have been afraid to fight openly. We can lose our jobs — we have fewer civil rights than any other minority group. Because we have few family ties and no children, for the most part, we have been active in many causes — but always in secret, because our name contaminates any cause that we work for.

To the radical lesbian, I say that we can no longer afford to fight for everyone else's cause while ignoring our own. Ours is a life style born out of a sick society — so is everyone else's. Our kind of love is as valid as anyone else's. The revolution must be fought for us, too, as well as blacks, Indians, welfare mothers, grape pickers, SDS people, Puerto Ricans, or mine workers. We must have a revolution for human rights.

Maybe after the revolution, people will be able to love each other regardless of skin color, ethnic origin, occupation, or type of genitals. But if that's going to happen, it will only happen because we make it — starting right now.



The sex life

