

**The “Dykes” Chapter:  
Response to “In Amerika They Call Us Dykes” as a Representation of Lesbian  
Participation in the 1970s US Women’s Health Movement**

By: Rachel Looff

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Timothy Dwight College

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## Introduction

When I read *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for the first time, I was surprised to find an entire chapter devoted to the lesbian experience. A burgeoning student of 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist activism, I was most familiar with feminist literature of the second wave that highlighted rigid divides between gay and straight activists. I approached *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, then, primed to find little discussion of lesbianism in a book written by a predominately straight women's health collective. The presence of "In Amerika They Call Us Dykes" in the book contradicted my perception of lesbianism's place in the feminist health movement. If, as so many scholars of the women's health movement assert, *Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)* was one of the most influential foundations of the feminist health movement, what does it mean that the book features an entire chapter on homosexuality?<sup>1</sup> And what can a study of the chapter's production and circulation reveal about lesbian activists within the movement?

A surprisingly rich body of scholarship exists about the women's health movement in America. Arguing that "by the 1970s, medicine, along with other social institutions, had suffered a 'stunning loss of confidence,'" historian Wendy Kline describes the emergence of a grassroots based health activism.<sup>2</sup> In the face of mounting protest against the Vietnam War, a developing counter culture, and the civil rights movement's demand for equality, a new wave of feminist activism took hold.<sup>3</sup> This wave of activism, dependent upon "the ability of women to tell each other their own stories, to claim them as the basis of political action," relied heavily upon

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<sup>1</sup> For scholarship on *OBOS*' influence on the women's health movement, see: Ruzek, Sheryl. "Transforming Doctor-Patient Relationships." *J Health Serv Res Policy* 12, no. 3 (July 2007): 181-182 and Wells, Susan. "Our Bodies, Ourselves: Reading the Written Body." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 697-723. *LGBT Life with Full Text, EBSCOhost* (accessed November 7, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, pg. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Weissman, Carol S. *Women's Health Care: Activist Traditions and Institutional Change*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pg.19.

consciousness-raising to make the personal political.<sup>4</sup> By calling on women to share their personal experiences with healthcare providers and institutions, activists mobilized an enormous feminist presence around the issue.<sup>5</sup> Female patients, tired of patriarchal doctors who dictated access to medical treatments and knowledge, united around shared goals of education and empowerment to place women back in control of their bodies.<sup>6</sup>

As many scholars now agree, The Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC) took center stage in the formation of a viable women's health movement.<sup>7</sup> Radicalized by one of the first feminist conferences in the United States, a small group of women shared stories of their frustration with the medical establishment. Regular consciousness-raising sessions transformed into informational seminars, and finally, in 1971, culminated in the publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Arguably one of the most influential publications in the 1970s women's health movement, *OBOS* "validated women's embodied experiences as a resource for challenging medical dogmas about women's bodies and, consequently, as a strategy for personal and collective empowerment."<sup>8</sup> After its widespread 1973 release by Simon & Schuster, *OBOS* quickly became "the bible of health," a centralized resource that presented informative, realistic descriptions of women's bodies and health. By hugely expanding the medical knowledge available to female patients, the book coordinated among its readers a "widespread network of women determined to rethink the relationship between mind and body." Furthermore, as it

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<sup>4</sup> Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, Flora. *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991, 228; in her Master's thesis, Lindsay Currie asserts that consciousness raising was integral to the women's health movement: Currie, Lindsay M. "Consciousness Raised: Women Increasing Health Literacy from "Our Bodies, Ourselves" to Breastcancer.org." Master's Thesis, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey—New Brunswick, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg.14.

<sup>7</sup> Sheryl Ruzek argues that "*OBOS* will long be studied for igniting and sustaining a worldwide women's health movement.": Ruzek, Sheryl. "Transforming Doctor-Patient Relationships," *J Health Serv Res Policy* 12, no 3 (July 2007), p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, Kathy. *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, pg. 2.

actively solicited suggestions and critiques from thousands of *OBOS* readers across America, *OBOS* insured that “women did not have to be actively involved in an organized feminist group to participate in the movement.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, the BWHBC and *OBOS* empowered female readers with access to feminist communities.

Despite this comprehensive scholarship that places *OBOS* solidly in the center of 1970s feminist health organizing, remarkably little attention focuses on the books’ treatment of lesbianism. Indeed, the subject of lesbianism within the women’s health movement in general has received minimal consideration. In entire books and chapters about the movement, lesbian involvement typically merits one to two pages of text.<sup>10</sup> This trend is certainly present in *OBOS* scholarship. Two of the most extensive studies are Wendy Kline’s *Politics of Knowledge* and Kathy Davis’ *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*. In the books, Kline and Davis devote a minimal amount of space to lesbianism. From the outset, both agree “the issue that the collective struggled with the most... was lesbianism.”<sup>11</sup> While, as Davis asserts, “in the context of a growing demand among lesbian women for recognition within the women’s movement, the BWHBC decided to include a chapter on lesbians,” the Collective continued to experience conflict over sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Comprised largely of middle-class, white, college-educated, heterosexual women, the BWHBC handed full editorial control of “In Amerika” over to a local gay collective, Lesbian Liberation. And although scholars briefly mention ideological clashes and “tumultuous storms” between the two groups, they do not push to develop the full story.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, existing literature does little to contextualize the impact “In Amerika” had on the

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<sup>9</sup> Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg. 25.

<sup>10</sup> See Morgan, Sandra. *Into Our Own Hands: the Women’s Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002; Weisman, Carol S, *Women’s Health Care: Activist Traditions and Institutional Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Kline, Wendy, *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, Kathy, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*, pg. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ruzek, Sheryl, “Transforming Doctor-Patient Relationships,” pg. 181.

women's health movement. While Kline recognizes that the chapter provided a valuable means of support for lesbian women across the nation, she concludes her analysis with only a brief mention of lesbian readers' desire for access to even more information.<sup>14</sup>

An analysis of Lesbian Liberation's "In Amerika" enriches this picture of lesbian activism in the women's health movement. By exploring the dynamic relationship between the BWHBC, Lesbian Liberation, and thousands of *OBOS* readers, it is possible to more fully consider "In Amerika"'s integral role in advancing lesbianism as a relevant concern in the women's health movement. While predominantly straight activists at times saw lesbians in the health movement as a burden, efforts to produce such literature as "In Amerika" not only challenged and strengthened relationships within the movement, but also sparked broader conversations about sexuality, medicine and society among an amazingly diverse readership. In this thesis, I will first analyze meeting minutes and correspondence from the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation's proceedings in the 1970s to question the notion of distrust and conflict as the dominant cords linking gay and straight health activists. Next, I will provide a close reading of the 1973 and 1976 "In Amerika" publications to highlight the chapter's role in articulating pressing medical and societal concerns facing lesbians in 1970s society. Finally, I will analyze reader response letters sent to Lesbian Liberation during the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> These letters force a deeper interpretation of Kline's assertion that "In Amerika" mobilized a community of empowered lesbians. In fact, the diverse array of responses indicates that "In Amerika" reached a much

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<sup>14</sup> Kline, Wendy, *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg. 37.

<sup>15</sup> In my research, I read reader response letters housed in the BWHBC collection at the Schlesinger Archives (16 folders) and in the Women's Educational Center records at Snell Library (1 folder). I read all of the letters at Snell Library, and randomly sampled half of the letters from each folder at the Schlesinger Archives. In the paper, all letter authors have been given pseudonyms. Those that didn't sign their letters have been left as "anonymous." Dates and locations remain the same.

broader swath of the American public, sparking a dynamic conversation about sexuality and societal reform.

### **Internal Dynamics**

An expanding body of scholarship narrates a complex identity for American feminist organizing throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Fraught with issues of sexuality, class, race, and age, the “Second Wave” was characterized by shared demands for equality, competing ideologies, and reluctant cooperation.<sup>16</sup> Within this turbulent activism, two dominant factions developed: liberal feminism and radical feminism. Described as an “unalterable division between mainstream, liberal equality feminism (which emphasized political and legal reform) and avant-garde, radical, liberation feminism (which stressed revolutionary socioeconomic and cultural changes), the divide between liberal and radical feminism hinged around assimilation.”<sup>17</sup> Liberal feminists, typically older than their radical counterparts, pushed for political equality within the existing system, while radical feminists argued that an entire structural overhaul was needed in order to achieve complete gender equality.

Despite their differences, liberal and radical feminists found a shared challenge in lesbianism. Betty Friedan, perhaps the epitome of liberal feminism in the 1960s, clearly outlined the faction’s stance on homosexuality. “[Casting] her discussion of sexuality in terms that would appeal to conventional, middle-class, heterosexual suburban women...she hinted at the dangers of lesbianism...and warned...that parasitical mothers would cause homosexuality to spread ‘like

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<sup>16</sup> Alice Echols’ book, *Daring to Be Bad*, provides a comprehensive account of conflict within the feminist community in the 1970s—particularly in regard to radical feminism: Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. See in particular chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>17</sup> Berkely, Kathleen. *The Women’s Liberation Movement in America*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999, pg. 52.

a murky smog over the American scene.”<sup>18</sup> On a wider scale, this mindset—common among liberal feminists in the late 1960s—translated into an antipathy toward lesbians in the women’s movement. Afraid the presence of gay women in the movement would cast all activists as lesbians, and would thus invalidate the entire movement, liberal feminists showed extreme reluctance to accept the “lavender menace” into their midst.<sup>19</sup> Radical feminists also struggled to incorporate lesbian activists. While not blatantly homophobic, radical feminism was, at least outwardly, dominated by a heterosexual agenda. As historian Alice Echols asserts: “The first wave of radical feminism was...characterized by the belief that ‘we are one. We are woman.’ But by 1970, the rhetoric of universal sisterhood had given way to wrenching discussions of women’s differences, as lesbians and working-class women challenged the assumption that there was a uniformity to women’s experiences and interests.”<sup>20</sup>

One aspect of the women’s liberation movement that experienced such challenge was the health movement. Theorists Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby stress that “the call for ‘control over one’s body’ [came] to be seen as the most radical demand feminists can make.”<sup>21</sup> This demand for control, however, took on a decidedly heterosexual tone. Much literature written at the time is remarkably silent on the topic of lesbianism. Sheryl Ruzek’s sociological study, *The Women’s Health Movement*, mentions lesbians 3 times in a comprehensive, 235-page report on her participant observation in the movement. At one point, she notes that “many lesbians complain that women’s clinics are riddled with ‘heterosex’ attitudes,” concluding that “lesbians’ complaints are well founded, for heterosexual women—many married and with children—

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<sup>18</sup> Horowitz, Daniel. *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998, pg. 204.

<sup>19</sup> Davis, Flora. *Moving the Mountain*, p. 259. For more discussion of this conflict, see Adam, Barry. *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987, pg. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Echols, Alice. *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pg. 203.

<sup>21</sup> Diamond, Irene and Lee Quinby. “American Feminism in the Age of the Body.” *Signs* 10, no. 1 (Autumn, 1984), p. 119.



predominate and are often unwittingly insensitive.”<sup>22</sup> By further highlighting the fact that “lesbians are particularly vulnerable to having their problems sexualized,” Ruzek presents a principal conflict within the women’s health movement: lesbian women at once faced incredibly relevant medical challenges, but found it difficult to gain the representation within the movement that would allow them to advocate for greatest change.<sup>23</sup> Other feminist anthologies and publications of the time focus on predominantly heterosexual issues—contraception, childcare, giving birth—and exhibit a reluctance to discuss homosexuality. Ellen Frankfurt’s 1972 book, *Vaginal Politics*, makes an eloquent case for the restructuring of the “fascinating, sometimes frightening, relationships between women patients and their male physicians.”<sup>24</sup> Throughout the text, however, Frankfurt eschews mention of lesbianism. Even in a section about psychiatry, Frankfurt limits stories of negative doctor/patient relationships to those centered around childbirth and sexual dysfunction in heterosexual couples.<sup>25</sup> While certainly deeply relevant, crucial issues, these narrow concerns highlight an unwillingness to acknowledge, or perhaps unawareness of, lesbian health concerns.

The relationship between the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation, however, questions the linearity of scholarly assumptions about gay and straight activists within the women’s health movement. While an analysis of meeting minutes, correspondence, and personal interviews supports the idea that some tension existed between gay and straight activists, a closer consideration complicates this generalization. In fact, not only did lesbians in the Boston area women’s liberation movement participate actively in multiple facets of organization, but straight

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<sup>22</sup> Ruzek, Sheryl. *The Women’s Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978, pg. 190.

<sup>23</sup> Ruzek, Sheryl. *The Women’s Health Movement*, pg. 81; for other examples of literature written in the 1970s that rarely mentions lesbian issues or activism in the movement, see: Frankfurt, Ellen. *Vaginal Politics*. New York City: Bantam, 1973.

<sup>24</sup> Frankfurt, Ellen. *Vaginal Politics*, front cover.

<sup>25</sup> Frankfurt, Ellen. *Vaginal Politics*, pg. 181

activists in the BWHBC also exhibited a willingness and even imperative to include a lesbian voice in *OBOS*.

When the BWHBC decided to include a section about lesbianism in *OBOS*, they approached members of Lesbian Liberation to write the chapter. Either unwilling or unable (they professed to be an entirely straight collective) to give voice to health issues pertinent to lesbianism in the 1970s, the BWHBC chose to solicit outside support. And while *OBOS*'s preface assures readers that "in some ways, learning about our womanhood from the inside out has allowed us to cross over the socially created barriers of race, color, income and class, and to feel a sense of identity with all women in the experience of being female," the BWHBC doesn't mention sexuality as an isolating factor that must be reconciled; it remains firmly in the category of "other."<sup>26</sup> A footnote in "In Amerika" hints at the firmly established boundary between the BWHBC and the "gay collective" that produced the chapter: "since the gay collective insisted on complete control over the style and content of this chapter, the Health Book Collective has not edited it. Because of length limitations, however, the gay collective has had to leave out much material that they feel is important."<sup>27</sup> From this footnote, it is clear that the BWHBC takes no responsibility for the chapter's content, and that Lesbian Liberation has reluctantly constrained their text to fit editorial limits. Although not an extremely visible conflict, the subtle provocation present in this relationship merits further consideration.

Suggestions of this conflict between the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation appear sporadically in meeting minutes, correspondence, and recollections within each group. During *OBOS*' revision process, in 1974, the BWHBC struggled to assert their voice in "In Amerika." In an October 1 document presented at a weekly collective meeting, a collective member expresses

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<sup>26</sup> The Boston Women's Health Book Collective. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Boston: Simon & Schuster, 1973, pg. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 56.

her discontent with “the gay chapter”: “I want to propose putting this chapter in a context in some way...presenting a more balanced picture—I worry about teenage women especially getting a one-sided picture from the existing chapter, and feeling confused and scared.”<sup>28</sup> The document doesn’t elaborate as to why the author thinks the 1973 chapter is taken out of context, or is a one-sided picture, but the maternal tone speaks to the unbalanced power relationship between the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation. The author seems to feel responsible for filtering the information presented in “In Amerika” so that it will fit into a broader schematic. Besides content concerns, tension existed over the chapter layout as well—specifically the page limit. Many of the admittedly limited references to “In Amerika” in the BWHBC’s daily proceedings hinge around page allocations. The collective members seem to chafe under Lesbian Liberation’s demand for more pages. Faced with strict editorial concerns, the BWHBC had to cut the entire *OBOS* manuscript down to 300 pages—50 of which would be allocated to “In Amerika.”<sup>29</sup> A drastic reduction from the 90 pages originally allotted to Lesbian Liberation, the 50 pages caused a huge uproar—an uproar only hinted at in written records. In a hastily-scribbled reflection upon a meeting with “the gay women,” the BWHBC remarks of “our revisions of gay paper” that the “gay women dislike it—didn’t want just one personal history at each point; want more space; VD chapter omits stuff on gay women.”<sup>30</sup> Highlighting conflict over not only space but also lesbian representation within the rest of *OBOS*, this memo supports the notion of an ideological divide between gay and straight activists within the health movement.

Lesbian Liberation members also remember moments of dissention and distrust. Mary Roberts, a founding member of the collective, recalls women’s movement meetings: “you’d go to meeting, and they’d warn you, ‘Oh, a lot of lesbians are gonna be there,’” as if lesbianism was

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<sup>28</sup> “Revision Plans.” October 1, 1974. BWHBC Papers, MC 503, box 104, folder 4.

<sup>29</sup> Meeting Minutes, March 28, 1970. BWHBC Papers, MC 503, box 1, folder 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

an incentive to not attend the meetings.<sup>31</sup> This recollection describes an intentional division between gay and straight activists. Conjuring an image of Betty Friedan’s liberal feminist challenge to lesbianism’s “alienating” presence within the women’s movement, it highlights an assumption, among feminist activists, that women looking to join the movement hoped to avoid issues of sexuality, or found heterosexual concerns like reproduction and contraception more pressing. But the picture isn’t so clear. Interviews with two original Lesbian Liberation members allow for a more nuanced reading of the written records documenting the chapter’s initial production. While these interviews do not shy away from mentions of disagreement and outright conflict during the process, they place the relationship between Lesbian Liberation and the BWHBC in a larger societal context, a context dictated by Simon and Schuster—*OBOS*’s mainstream publisher.

In fact, members of the BWHBC were rather attuned to the lesbian presence in the health movement; they fully acknowledged the need to include a chapter on lesbian health issues in *OBOS*. Notes from 1971 meeting minutes indicate the BWHBC engaged in frank discussion about sexuality. Posing such questions as “is homosexuality a disease?” and considering “notions of stereotypes of lesbians—how we label people, box them in,”<sup>32</sup> these discussions attempt to address not only lesbian health issues, but also the challenges of being a lesbian in 1970s society. Far from rejecting lesbianism as irrelevant, collective members worked to incorporate it into their discussions of *OBOS*. Perhaps most intriguing is open acknowledgement, among members of the collective, of their own sexual encounters with other women. September 15<sup>th</sup> meeting minutes reference “notions of our own bisexuality” as central to the BWHBC’s relationship with

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<sup>31</sup> Miller, Toni and Mary Roberts. Interview with Rachel Loeff. Personal Interview. Boston, December 9, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Meeting Minutes, April 5, 1971 and September 15, 1971. BWHBC Papers, MC 503, box 1, folder 13. Although there are not many references to lesbianism in the collection, more examples can be found in folders 14 and 17 of box 1.

“In Amerika.” One collective member remarks that “after a gay relationship, she had more of a sense of self with [her male partner].” It was “a way of finding her own sexuality.”<sup>33</sup> So despite a public identity as a straight collective, the BWHBC was more attuned to the lesbian experience than most scholars or public records recognize.

Perhaps due to this personal connection, the BWHBC was adamant that “In Amerika” be included in *OBOS*. In fact, it was Simon and Schuster—the mainstream publishing house the BWHBC selected to produce the 1973 *OBOS* edition—that introduced tension into the drafting process. The BWHBC remained an intermediate through the process, torn between two extremely polarized groups. Ultimately, as Roberts recalls, the BWHBC put lesbian inclusion in the book above their editors’ wishes.<sup>34</sup>

“It’s really interesting. Because the collective said, ‘Oh we need to add something about lesbianism, because there’s really nothing in there.’ And then the editor goes, ‘ok, it can be a subsection of psychiatry’...and they freak out and go, ‘Oh no. The whole point is for it not to be a subset of the psychiatry chapter. To take it out of that framework and put it into sexuality. So what it will be instead is a subsection of the sexuality chapter. They then amassed a number of us to come in and write the section that would be a subsection of sexuality...so we go out and meet, a diverse group of us, and say ‘not good enough.’ Particularly for the folks who had been out for a long time. ‘What we’re up against is not simply the expression of our sexuality. What we’re up against is an institution that’s denying us...we’re dealing with psychiatrists who want to give us electrodes. And we’re dealing with a prison system that treats us...so it’s really about every aspect of life. We need our own chapter to discuss what it means in the broader institutional framework of society.’<sup>35</sup>

The process of getting Simon and Schuster to agree to an entire chapter was long, contentious, and wrought with tears. It was difficult to get the BWHBC to fully support Lesbian Liberation’s demand for a chapter “because [the BWHBC] wanted to get the book published. Their principles said, ‘well...the gay girls are a thing, [they] have some legitimacy. But if you want the book

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<sup>33</sup> Meeting Minutes, September 15, 1971. BWHBC Papers, MC 503, box 1, folder 13. Oral History interviews confirm that members of the BWHBC had affairs with women.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts and Miller Interview, December 9, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

published, we can't do what they say.' There were three of them who were just sobbing during the meeting."<sup>36</sup> So for women of the BWHBC, it was a question of balancing their principles with their desire to see their book published and widely distributed. And throughout the negotiation process, they remained faithful to Lesbian Liberation's demands, ultimately convincing Simon and Schuster to give up a whole chapter.<sup>37</sup>

The BWHBC's effort to secure Lesbian Liberation its own chapter presents the most direct challenge to the perception of continuous tension between gay and straight health activists. Lesbian Liberation's integration into a wider leftist network of activism, however, further enhances the argument. Roberts and Miller remember that many BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation women got their start in Bread and Roses, a radical women's liberation group that started in the late 1960s.<sup>38</sup> Representing the Boston area "women's liberation critique of the new left, and anti war movement," Bread and Roses connected women from around the Northeast, offering an outlet for both political activism and informal consciousness-raising.<sup>39</sup> By taking part in such groups as Bread and Roses, organizing anti war protests, and working as tenant organizers, lesbians involved in the drafting of "In Amerika" were organized into a network oriented around leftist activism, rather than a lesbian identity. Although the women who gathered to combine their experiences into "In Amerika" remained fiercely devoted to and uncompromising in their personal identities, they also participated in the socialist organizing and feminist critiques of the left that characterized the broader women's movement. In this way, Roberts and Miller's

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> In an oral history by Kathy Davis, Jane Pincus remembers that Lesbian Liberation challenged members of the BWHBC: "These more...radical women stretched our—my—ways of thinking a lot. Compared to some of them, we were pretty reactionary and bourgeois. It put things in perspective...[as] they were the people who reminded us that we shouldn't make compromises."—Pincus, Jane. Interview with Kathy Davis: Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, pg. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Miller and Roberts Interview, December 9, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

interviews bridge traditional conceptions of lesbian separatism in the women's movement.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, these interviews document a rich network of personal friendships and activism extending beneath political ideology.

Lesbian Liberation was very involved in Boston's lesbian social scene. Its members recall meeting women on the basketball court and in the bars. They passed out flyers on the street and made friends with "all these 17, 18 year olds from working class neighborhoods around the Boston area, who were...sort of out, compared to a lot of people;" they followed a lesbian band called Lee Carol and the Burgandies around to all the women's nights at bars.<sup>41</sup> These interactions stand against the narrative of separation and distrust between groups of lesbian women in the 1970s. Miller acknowledges that, "one of the problems with the women's movement...was where women didn't feel welcome—working class women. You know, they didn't like bourgeois feminists. Being good socialists, of course, we were against that, but nobody knew exactly what to do about that." But, she follows up, "the lesbians were going to the bar...and it was a commonality that bridged that to a certain extent."<sup>42</sup> If bars bridged certain tensions between lesbians, they also helped bring gay and straight activists together: "in those days, often straight girls and gay girls went [to the bars] together, because we circle danced. The ethic was against monogamy...and nobody was ever excluded. And this came off too from being involved in the anti war movement, and liberation, and Vietnam."<sup>43</sup> Highlighting common activist ground between gay and straight women, Miller describes crossover not only in ideology, but also social and political activities. In this context, "In Amerika" takes on new significance in its place as the

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<sup>40</sup> Jane Gerhard states that: "lesbian separatism, which began in 1971, offered an important critique of heterosexuality as an expression of internalized male domination...They advocated that women should sever ties with men and reject the privileges heterosexuality brought them." Gerhard, Jane. *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920-1982*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pg. 154.

<sup>41</sup> Miller and Roberts Interview, December 9, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

only gay chapter in *OBOS*. The story of intense conflict with Simon and Schuster (resolved only through the BWHBC's heroic efforts) describes "In Amerika" as a welcome, if occasionally contentious, addition to the book. So what exactly did "In Amerika" add to *OBOS*? An analysis of the chapter's early editions sheds further light on lesbian issues within the health movement.

### **"In Amerika They Call us Dykes"—1973 and 76**

From the outset, "In Amerika"'s authors clearly establish their chapter as "a beginning, the beginning of our efforts to define for ourselves what it means to be a lesbian in this society."<sup>44</sup> And in many ways, this influential chapter *was* a beginning. One of the first women's health movement publications devoted specifically to a consideration of homosexuality, "In Amerika" presents a crucial platform upon which to analyze early lesbian involvement in the 1970s women's health movement. Highlighting a diversity of experiences among its contributors, the chapter articulates the physical, mental, and social challenges facing gay women in the 1970s. Broken into an introduction and 6 subsections—focusing on "coming out," therapy, socializing, relationships, class struggles, and lesbian motherhood—"In Amerika" sheds light on multiple facets of the lesbian experience in the 1970s. Importantly, while the authors discuss a number of relevant physical and mental health concerns, their chapter also recognizes broader social challenges that play an integral role in constraining, denying, or isolating gay women.

Before analyzing "In Amerika" as a product of the 1970s, it is crucial to contextualize that setting in the framework of emerging lesbian subcultures of the 1950s and 60s. Historian Lillian Faderman, in her influential analysis of lesbian life in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America, describes solidifying lesbian communities in postwar America: "there were various lesbian subcultures in

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<sup>44</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, p 56.



the 1950s and 60s, depending on class and age. Working class and young lesbians experienced a lesbian society very different from that of upper- and middle-class older lesbians.”<sup>45</sup> Among working class lesbians, gay bars and butch/femme relationships were the most typical outlets through which to claim their sexual identity. Heavily policed environments, the gay bars of the 1950s became a space in which lesbian women fought to establish political and social validity. Upper- and middle-class lesbians, better educated and frequently married, tended to eschew the bar scene in favor of closely-knit lesbian communities centered on the emerging homophile movement.<sup>46</sup> As Faderman asserts, however, “despite differences, what the lesbian subcultures...shared was the burden of conceptualizing themselves with very little history to use as guidelines.”<sup>47</sup>

By the end of the 1960s, lesbians shifted this conceptualization away from bars or assimilation in favor of a radically charged political identity. Many accounts of the lesbian feminism that developed in the 1970s describe the identity as a highly intentional choice, the epitome of feminist rejection of mainstream, heterosexist society. Jill Johnston, herself a lesbian feminist and author of the 1973 *Lesbian Nation*, describes lesbianism as the obvious, ideal form of feminist separatism.<sup>48</sup> Historians echo her sentiment to describe lesbian feminism in the 1970s: “many women came out for the first time in the midst of the women’s movement and struggled for both a personal and political orientation in an environment radically different from

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<sup>45</sup> Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002, pg. 160.

<sup>46</sup> For a description of differing lesbian experiences in the 1950s and 60s, see Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls*, chapter 7: Butches, Femmes, and Kikis: Creating Lesbian Subcultures in the 1950s and 60s, p. 159-187. For more on lesbian bar culture see Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. New York: Routledge, Inc, 1993. For a description of lesbian activism in the homophile movement see Esterberg, KG, “From Accommodation to Liberation—a Social Movement Analysis of Lesbians in the Homophile Movement.” *Gender & Society* Vol. 8, Issue 3 (Sep 1, 1994) p. 424-443, <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/jumpstart.jhtml>. Web.

<sup>47</sup> Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, pg. 160.

<sup>48</sup> Johnston, Jill. *Lesbian Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973. In the 1970s, lesbian separatists developed urban and rural collectives in which they formed lives outside of male and heterosexual influence. Historians such as Alice Echols note that not all lesbians at the time were separatists, however. Many retained a visible presence in feminist organizations such as NOW.

that of ‘traditional’ lesbians.”<sup>49</sup> For these women, a lesbian identity was often the culmination of an intense ideological upheaval.<sup>50</sup> It was an intentional assumption of an identity that at times seemed to chafe against the butch/femme communities and homophile organizations that so characterized earlier lesbian organizing. And while this new, highly politicized, radical identity drives much of the narrative tone in “In Amerika,” lingering connections to political and moral battles of the 1950s and 60s deeply color the authors’ experiences.

A true representation of the collective spirit popularized in the women’s liberation movement, “In Amerika” isn’t told through a solitary, pedantic voice. Relying upon contributions from 15 different women—9 of whom were involved in Lesbian Liberation—the chapter intentionally weaves together a diversity of experiences to attempt to appeal to as large an audience as possible. Admitting that “there are many things we had to leave out, because of space limitations or because we do not have the experience to write about them,” the authors nonetheless include experiences from women who discovered their sexuality at a young age, those who were previously married with children, those who had spent time in psychiatric hospitals, those who were monogamous, those who had multiple partners.<sup>51</sup> Importantly, however, despite these differing points of view, each contributor to “In Amerika” has “in common that [she] digs being gay; [she] thinks it’s one of the most positive aspects of her life.”<sup>52</sup> By presenting such varied—and frequently depressing or challenging—stories tied together by a shared acceptance of and pride in a sexual identity, the chapter then becomes an intentionally

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<sup>49</sup> Adam, Barry. *Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, pg. 89.

<sup>50</sup> Berkely, Kathleen. *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, pg. 50.

<sup>51</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 56—women not included: lesbianism in prison, black lesbians, armed forces, older gay women. In this section, I refer to the chapter authors by their first names because that is how they are represented in the chapter.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

crafted avenue through which questioning, isolated, or curious women can approach from multiple angles.

Expressing a desire to “break down the myths, misrepresentations, and outright lies that make possible our oppression and exploitation as lesbians, and that control not only our lives but the lives of straight women as well,” Lesbian Liberation authors utilize their chapter as a lens through which to examine a number of social institutions and phenomena.<sup>53</sup> The introduction warns: “doctors, lawyers, clergy, and counselors are others who because of their position of power over us can cause much trouble if they know we are gay.”<sup>54</sup> Doctors and counselors, in particular, merit significant attention in the gay chapter of the book that would arguably launch the modern women’s health movement.

### Mental Health

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers, therapists, and medical authorities increasingly discussed homosexuality as a pathological condition. In his work, *A History of Homosexual Rights and Emancipatory Science in America*, historian Henry Minton tracks the scientific community’s changing perception of sexuality as it shifted away from a consideration of individual acts, and toward a recognition of personal identity: “By the 1930s there was an extensive sexological literature on homosexuality in America, Britain, and Europe. With some notable exceptions by homosexual activists...this literature was driven assumption that homosexuality was a form of sexual pathology.”<sup>55</sup> And this assumption carried into broader social mores. From the 1930s on, gay men and women experienced harsh policing (in the form of

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<sup>53</sup> OBOS, 1973, pg. 56.

<sup>54</sup> OBOS, 1973, pg. 62.

<sup>55</sup> Minton, Henry. *Departing from Deviance: A History of Homosexual Rights and Emancipatory Science in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pg. 3-4. See also: Bohan, Janis. *Psychology and Sexual Orientation: Coming to Terms*. New York: Routledge, 1996, pg. 16-17.

aggressive raids, arrests, and termination from government jobs) aimed at protecting society from “sex deviants” and “perverts.”<sup>56</sup> In the medical establishment as well, treatments designed to “cure” gay men and lesbians persisted into the 1970s—at which point the APA removed homosexuality from the DSM. These therapies—including aversion therapy, electroshock therapy, and psychoanalysis—were reportedly used throughout American society, and, far from being successful, seriously hindered gay men and women’s realization of a positive self-image.<sup>57</sup>

In the section entitled “The-rapists: Lesbians and Psychiatry,” authors highlight the serious problems posed by the mental health establishment: “the psychoanalysts say homosexuality is sickness. Middle-class America believes and repeats, ‘Homosexuality is a sickness.’”<sup>58</sup> Isolating mental health professionals as major contributors to institutional perpetuation of the ‘homosexual as sick’ mentality, “In Amerika” makes the somewhat bold assertion that lesbians frequently experience significantly more harm than solace at the hands of psychiatrists and psychologists. Molly’s story—the only one included in the therapy section—is a particularly dramatic example. Seeking psychiatric help and eventually hospitalization after her lover committed suicide, Molly was denied the care that would prevent her from turning to alcohol to solve her problems:

“Oblivious to the fact that I managed to get drunk every day for fifteen months in the hospital, they began to assault my lesbianism: sometimes they assigned me an aide to follow me around the ward; they threw me into ‘preventative seclusion’...all the doctors were willing to ship me away permanently to the back wards of state hospitals, not because I was harming myself (drinking is just a symptom, they said), but because I lived wrongly...They were so into forcing my life to conform to their theories that while I was literally dying of alcoholism they wanted to know what my lover and I did in bed.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Terry, Jennifer. *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pg. 268-275.

<sup>57</sup> Silverstein, Charles. “History of Treatment/The Medical Treatment of Homosexuality,” *Textbook of Homosexuality*. Cabaj and Stein, American Psychiatric Association, 1996.

<sup>58</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 63.

<sup>59</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 64.

Molly's story points to the rift between her conception of "lesbianism as one of the more positive and beautiful aspects of my life" and the medical profession's perception of homosexuality as the root cause of many psychological problems. It describes not only an instance of discrimination and maltreatment toward lesbian women by the medical establishment, but also the tendency of medical professionals in the 1970s to look to sexual orientation as an illness underlying many other medical problems.<sup>60</sup>

In her interview, Mary Roberts remembers her own interactions with mental health professionals. Referencing the few older Lesbian Liberation members who had themselves gone through therapy designed to "correct" their sexual identity, Roberts describes a certain inability by younger collective members to fully conceptualize the depth of the problems with the mental institution. She recalls, however, her own struggles to overcome psychiatrists' conceptions of her "deviance": "Toni and I were invited to come to the psychiatry department at Cambridge hospital. And we were coming as the 'healthy homosexuals'—allegedly. That's our claim...so we get up there, not knowing that it was full of these very conservative Freudians." And though "there were stirrings among the psychiatric, social work population of having to revisit some assumptions about homosexuality given the rise of gay liberation," it "was a rough ride." The psychiatrists listening to her presentation pressed her to admit that homosexual child abuse would be much more damaging for a child than heterosexual child abuse. They insisted that homosexual interactions would destroy the possibility of a healthy sex life.<sup>61</sup> In much the same way as Molly's story, then, Roberts' interactions with mental health professionals highlight the continued urgency, in the 1970s, to separate sexuality from mental illness. Without positive recognition from the psychiatric establishment, homosexuality would continue to persist in social

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<sup>60</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Miller and Roberts Interview, December 9, 2012.

conception as a pathological condition, more deserving of treatment than acceptance and celebration.

### Physical Care

Besides focusing on the characterization of many lesbians as mentally ill or “maladjusted to life,” “In Amerika” also highlights barriers to physical care as a health concern relevant to gay women.<sup>62</sup> Asserting that “gynecologists pose a special problem” since “often we are forced to tell them we are gay” and “when we tell them, not only may we be subjected to lectures, snide comments, and voyeuristic questions but we may find that, after all that, they are totally ignorant about our problems. Very little research is done on the medical problems of lesbians, and gynecologists often don’t bother to acquaint themselves with what is known.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, “In Amerika” emphasizes apathetic medical care as an issue of specific concern for lesbians. Jody’s account of her struggle with endometriosis details this challenge in access to medical care. Developing endometriosis after a bad abortion, Jody struggled with the idea of telling her gynecologist that she sleeps with women. Eventually choosing to visit a “gynecologist who I’d heard was sympathetic to women,” Jody found that “instead of answering my question, his face got very stiff and ‘professional,’ and he said, ‘Perhaps you should explain what you do sexually, so I’ll have a better idea how it affects you.’” After repeated attempts to explain her condition to him, Jody recalled that “he said, ‘your disease is psychological, not medical. I know a very good psychiatrist whom I would recommend that you see. He has cured many homosexuals.’”<sup>64</sup> Jody’s frustration is evident throughout the piece. As she asks the doctor: “are you telling me that I didn’t get endometriosis from a rotten abortion six years ago, that it’s all in my head?” or recalls

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<sup>62</sup> Miller and Roberts Interview, December 9, 2012.

<sup>63</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 62.

<sup>64</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 63.

informing him that “only a violent feminist revolution would deal with my feelings about men and that he’d definitely be on the top of my list,” her empowered, militant voice drives the narrative.<sup>65</sup> By showcasing Jody as an empowered lesbian who reclaimed her healthcare from a physician’s engrained assumptions, “In Amerika” then not only decries healthcare inequalities present in the American system, but also provides examples for change.

### The Gay Experience

“In Amerika”—evoking *OBOS*’ broad theme of increased knowledge and control—emphasizes the need for more sympathetic, proactive mental and physical care for lesbian patients. Importantly, however, the chapter goes further. It presents stories about recognizing sexual attraction to women, struggling with coming out, navigating class differences in lesbian culture, and raising children, in order to tie lesbian health into a broader sense of individual and social well-being.<sup>66</sup> As the introduction observes, “the horror and fear with which others view us have served to ghettoize us, to isolate us not only from the straight world, but from each other, since we must stay hidden to survive.”<sup>67</sup> A major part of achieving a sense of well-being is finding a way to combat isolation—in both a metaphorical and physical sense. “Out of the Closet and Into the Frying Pan,” the subsection devoted to a discussion of coming out, recognizes the extreme challenges a lesbian faces when deciding whether or not to come out: “if we decide to be openly gay, we become vulnerable to physical and psychological harassment. We’re labeled sick, kept away from the kids, maybe fired from our jobs. If we keep our gayness hidden, we are constantly subjected to the insult and embarrassment of being assumed to be heterosexual...more

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<sup>65</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 63.

<sup>66</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, whole chapter (different headings).

<sup>67</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 56.

important, our lives may be controlled by fear.”<sup>68</sup> Describing a number of valid concerns for openly gay women in the 1970s, this section describes coming out as a personal decision with a public outcome. By sharing the stories of 6 different lesbians, all of whom had to navigate rather different experiences during their coming out, “In Amerika” seeks to empower a broad readership with the personal reassurance and political drive to come out themselves.

So through personal, first-hand accounts of experiences with family, friends, lovers, doctors, lawyers, and society in general, “In Amerika” details many facets of the lesbian experience in the 1970s. More than simply articulating an experience, however, the chapter demands change. Lesbian Liberation initially functioned as a consciousness-raising group, reportedly focused on discussions of personal problems rather than direct political activism.<sup>69</sup> But “In Amerika” transitions from consciousness-raising into political activism. By carefully crafting and widely distributing a diverse—yet surprisingly specific—lesbian experience, the authors use their chapter as not only a means to articulate and understand their own experiences, but to also empower a huge readership to do the same.

It is important to note that little changes about this overall goal between the 1973 and 1976 “In Amerika” editions. Both written by Lesbian Liberation, the chapters contain essentially the same information. A few words are changed in the 1976 version, and two more women’s stories are represented (one of whom is a woman of color).<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the sections all remain constant, and the information presented is the same. Throughout the 1970s, then, “In Amerika” remained a constant presence in the canon of lesbian literature. Characterized by a radicalized, militant tone, the chapter’s language is firmly situated within a period of political upheaval. The

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<sup>68</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 61.

<sup>69</sup> “Meeting Minutes,” 13 April, 1973. Box 3, folder 118 of The Women’s Education Center Collection at Snell Library.

<sup>70</sup> The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976.



chapter title—reclaiming “Dykes” as an empowering term, and evoking the Civil Rights Movement with the use of “Amerika”—establishes a radical intention that later chapters would work to diminish. The chapter itself asserts “we exist secretly where we work and where we live. And each time we are made to feel invisible, insulted, or freakish, we add more anger and hatred to our stored up frustrations.”<sup>71</sup> In later *OBOS* editions, the gay chapter would leave these references to anger, hatred, and depression behind: they would focus on inclusivity toward all “queer” women rather than “lesbians” (an initial challenge Lesbian Liberation encountered was outrage over their dismissal of bisexuality as impossible in modern society); they would turn their exploration inward to personal rather than shared experience.<sup>72</sup> By *OBOS*’s 1984 edition, “In Amerika”’s bold title would be replaced by the more sedate “Loving Women: Lesbian Life and Relationships.” And in 1998, the chapter would undergo further change to simply “Relationships with Women.” Significantly, these chapters would be included in *OBOS* as part of larger sections detailing relationships with men as well.<sup>73</sup> In this way, “In Amerika” remains deeply rooted within its origins in 1970s feminist activism. By detailing a lesbian experience firmly cemented within these bounds, it becomes a crucial window into the unique challenges faced by gay women at the time.

## Letters

Although they comprise a large proportion of 1970s reader response to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, letters specifically addressing Lesbian Liberation and the “In Amerika” chapter have received remarkably little scholarly attention. In her detailed consideration of *OBOS*’s creation

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<sup>71</sup> *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 65.

<sup>72</sup> Lindsey, Elizabeth Sarah. “Reexamining Gender and Sexual Orientation: Revisioning the Representation of Queer and Trans People in the 2005 Edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 184-185.

<sup>73</sup> Bonilla, Zobeida. “Including Every Women: The All-Embracing ‘We’ of ‘*Our Bodies, Ourselves*.’” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 178.

and reception, Kline devotes two pages to an analysis of reader response to the “gay chapter.” She limits her observation to lesbians’ requests for more information and concludes that “although many respondents were enthusiastic about the chapter, they also pushed for more material.”<sup>74</sup> While certainly an accurate observation, this conclusion fails to take into account the rich diversity among readers’ responses.

An analysis of approximately 250 letters written to *Lesbian Liberation* between 1973 and 1979 suggests that “In Amerika” reached an enormously diverse audience, and precipitated four main categories of response: lesbian women, straight women, research requests, and medical response. While “In Amerika” played an important role in changing individual mindsets, the diverse content in many of these letters indicates that the chapter also encouraged a reciprocal relationship in which readers sought to supplement and challenge ideas about lesbianism in the women’s health movement.

### Lesbian Women

An overwhelming majority of the letters written to *Lesbian Liberation* originated from self-identified lesbian women. Written by a diverse group of women—distinguished by location, age, class, educational status, even by incarceration in prison—these letters detail an enormous, if disconnected, lesbian community. As this community is still being defined in recent scholarship, it is perhaps understandable that most existing literature focuses almost solely on lesbian response to *Lesbian Liberation*’s chapter. Specifically, historians have considered “In Amerika”’s impact on lesbian readers. Kline and Davis both assert in their *OBOS* histories that a

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<sup>74</sup>Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg. 7.

large percentage of these women expressed an intensely positive relationship with the chapter.<sup>75</sup> Many wrote to the collective solely to express their support. In a 1979 letter from Evansville, IN, Angela Barker reaches out to Lesbian Liberation from a jail cell. Coming across *OBOS* in the jail's library, Barker has read only the "In Amerika" chapter. Openly gay for two years (though with many friends who are afraid to come out), she writes to the collective, "the chapter really made me feel good." Interested in expressing her identification with the chapter authors, Barker discusses her own development of a gay identity at age 10, her coming out process, and concludes with the bold statement: "All I can say is I am gay and proud and will continue to live the way I want and feel and hopefully the straight people will eventually accept and try to understand better. But I know all never will."<sup>76</sup>

Many women echo Barker's support for "In Amerika." A 1974 letter speaks to the void of knowledge the chapter attempts to fill: "I read the bit you did in 'Our Bodies, Ourselves.'—it was the first article on Lesbianism I really enjoyed. The thing is, I was heartened by the struggle other women went through, and I want to know more, more, more! The lack of material is devastating—I feel like I have to go underground to get any info."<sup>77</sup> The author here highlights the frustrating lack of information that makes it difficult for lesbian women to overcome societal stereotypes about their own "perversion." She notes that "the title 'lesbian' still gags me whenever I choose to write or say the word," but also praises "In Amerika" for providing her with a medium through which to connect with other lesbians and recognize that her struggle is a shared one. This appreciation for "In Amerika" echoes throughout the response letters. Described

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<sup>75</sup> Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge*, pg. 37; Davis, Kathy. *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*, pg. 27; although many women expressed their support, others lamented "In Amerika"'s limited scope. They enjoyed the information presented so much they wished there could have been an entire book. This complaint perhaps reflects more the struggle over editorial control than it does Lesbian Liberation's intentional omission of certain information.

<sup>76</sup> Angela Barker to LL, September 10, 1979, Evansville, Indiana; The Women's Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286.

<sup>77</sup> Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, February 3, 1974; The Women's Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 1, folder 67.

in such phrases as “your forthright and courageous article,” “inspiring and helpful,” and simply “beautiful,” the chapter became, for many lesbian readers, a positive, even transformative, experience.<sup>78</sup> At a time when both medical institutions and broad social norms characterized homosexuality as a mental illness or perversion, and sought to “cure” gay men and women, “In Amerika”’s presentation of a refreshing, realistic alternative clearly resonated with many women.

More than simply writing to express gratitude, many lesbian women viewed “In Amerika”’s authors as an authoritative source of information. Particularly in regard to coming out (and coming to terms with a lesbian identity), joining a lesbian community, and debunking medical myths, lesbian response letters solicit specific advice and pose often-emotional questions—questions that highlight both medicalized views of homosexuality, and largely invisible lesbian communities. As Kathy Davis observes in her brief study of “In Amerika,” the chapter arguably “became a landmark publication on sexuality and relationships between women, providing encouragement to countless women to ‘come out’ as women loving women.”<sup>79</sup> A close reading of response letters indicates that this encouragement was at times quite subtle. Rather than reading the chapter and immediately deciding to come out, many women wrote for advice, or to express previously unvoiced feelings and concerns.

For some women, “coming out” meant first clearly defining their sexual identity.<sup>80</sup> 20-year old college student Alice Walker writes to the Collective about her uncertainty: “sometimes

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<sup>78</sup> Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, October 16, 1973, Laramie, Wyoming; BWHBC Records MC 503, box 159, folder 6; Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, January 24, 1976, L.I., New York; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 11; Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, April 1974, New York, New York; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 7.

<sup>79</sup> Davis, Kathy. *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*, pg. 27.

<sup>80</sup> For another example, see: Anonymous author to Lesbian Liberation, 1975; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286. In the letter, the author states that after reading “In Amerika,” she “saw the opportunity to write [Lesbian Liberation]. I haven’t been able to tell anyone or write to anyone about this and so it will feel good to me to analyze it all on paper.”

I would like to talk to people like you who maybe would understand me, help me understand myself more. I would like a sort of pen pal relationship until I found someone like you. There are not many outspoken, open-minded women around here. Please somebody write to me soon.”<sup>81</sup>

Another letter from a 16-year-old asks for more concrete information. From the outset, Judy Deener states that “[she is] a homosexual.” She describes, however, a complicated process during which she transitioned from believing “homosexuals were people who waited inside bathrooms and bars so they could attack you,” to feeling “not ashamed of being a homosexual anymore.” While Deener clearly attributes much of her new identity to “In Amerika,” she goes further to ask for more information to help decide if she wants to come out, if she is ready for a sexual relationship with a woman.<sup>82</sup> By asking for more literature about sexuality, Deener addresses Lesbian Liberation as a catalyst, rather than a final arbiter.

For other women, secure in their identity, “coming out” meant knowing to whom to come out. Numerous response letters from around the country highlight a common, depressing reality for many 1970s lesbians—complete lack of a visible gay community. One of the most common questions in the letters is how to meet other gay women. A 1973 letter from a lesbian couple in a small New York town describes a bleak existence: “when you live in a secret, you begin to feel as if you are not real. We need contact with other gays so we can say to someone—‘look! We love each other and we do exist!’”<sup>83</sup> The authors, secret lovers in a conservative town, are afraid to come out publicly due to the very real threat they might lose their jobs. By seeking out information about how to meet other gay people in the area, the women reach out to the Collective as the only avenue through which they can join an affirming community. Other letters

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<sup>81</sup> Alice Walker, to Lesbian Liberation, March 1974: BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 7.

<sup>82</sup> Judy Deener to Lesbian Liberation, undated; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 1, folder 67.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah St. James and Silvia Winters, to Lesbian Liberation, August 6, 1973, Coening, New York; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286.

confirm this gnawing sense of isolation. Particularly for lesbian readers in small towns across America, connecting with other gay women represented a crucial step in both coming out and developing a positive conception of their sexuality. An anonymous letter from Troy, New York (described as “a semi-hick town”) cites isolation as a major obstacle to coming out and entering into a relationship with another woman.<sup>84</sup> Even though she is “dying to be in a relationship,” she can see very few viable options for connecting with lesbians in her local area. Lesbian Liberation has then become an integral facilitator for a growing network of lesbian communication.<sup>85</sup> Importantly, however, community building is not meant to stop after an exchange of letters. The information Lesbian Liberation provides instead permeates deeply into these isolated regions, empowering women to form their own networks of interaction.

Besides issues of coming out and connecting with a gay community, lesbian responses highlight a focus on therapy and mental health. In particular, letters describe negative experiences with mental health professionals. An 18-year-old student at Louisiana State University presents a matter of fact account: “I myself am a lesbian. Presently, I am seeing a social worker and am receiving medication from the Baton Rouge Mental Health Center in order to deal with this situation.” While it is unclear what sort of medication the student is receiving, or how she got in touch with the Mental Health Center, it is apparent the student is seeking treatment so her family will not find out she is a lesbian; she states that she has no intention of

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<sup>84</sup> Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, 1974, Troy, New York; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 7.

<sup>85</sup> It is clear that Lesbian Liberation flourished in this role. An undated letter from Karen Williams is a reply to a letter she received from a “sister” in Lesbian Liberation. Thanking her for her response, Williams writes, “it’s comforting to know that I’m not totally alone in my fears and feelings. I’m looking for some sort of meeting place I can go to—probably a bar. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” This letter is a snapshot of a developing relationship, an intentional support system. Williams has previously reached out for comfort, and, like so many women from small, rural communities, finds it with Lesbian Liberation: Karen Williams, to Lesbian Liberation, undated; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 1.

telling her family “what I am.”<sup>86</sup> Evidencing both the persistent tendency for mental health professionals to treat homosexuality with medication, and the tension experienced by young gay men and women in the 1970s—trying to navigate living at home with a conservative family and learning more about the gay community—this letter likely describes a common experience. It is crucial, then, to consider why the student writes to Lesbian Liberation. By asking them for information about how to meet other lesbians, how to deal with her own feelings, and how to get involved in “the movement,” the student begins to question her experiences with her social worker and the Mental Health Center. She has been empowered by “In Amerika,” to seek different, more positive experiences.

Other letters provide similar accounts of medication and therapy meant to “cure” homosexuality.<sup>87</sup> More common, however, is a tendency for letters to describe unhelpful, apathetic counseling. A lengthy 1973 letter presents a frustrated account: it was “a complete and total horror show. One hour, thirty dollars, and enough ill feelings to never want to think of ‘coming out’ or entering any kind of therapy situation again.”<sup>88</sup> A similar letter laments that “so far my therapy has been less than effective in establishing an identity for myself.”<sup>89</sup> For these women, struggling with questions about personal, life changing decisions, therapy does not seem a productive option. In the face of unresponsive therapists, Lesbian Liberation becomes an important player. The collective not only offers a scathing review on the mental health

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<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, December 20, 1973, Baton Rouge, LA; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 6.

<sup>87</sup> For examples see: BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous, to Lesbian Liberation, July 23, 1973, Providence, Rhode Island; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 6: importantly, the author later had a very positive experience with a therapist—she emphasizes that they mainly discussed “person” issues rather than “gay” issues. This experience supports the idea that therapy experiences in the 1970s depended drastically on individual therapists.

<sup>89</sup> Hannah Morgan, to Lesbian Liberation, February 19, 1974, Shalimar, Florida; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 1, folder 67.

establishment, but also provides a viable alternative for lesbians looking for support and information.<sup>90</sup>

Despite these instances of unhelpful and even damaging mental health care, some letters depict a more positive relationship with counseling and therapy. It seems as if social workers, in particular, helped connect lesbian women to enriching, affirming information. Esther Parker, from a small Virginia town, thanks her social worker for first introducing her to “In Amerika.” Living with her parents after a break-up with her girlfriend, 25-year-old Parker visits a social worker as a means of coping not only with her break-up but also her inability (due to her isolation) to meet other gay women.<sup>91</sup> Crucially, her counselor’s willingness to suggest such a controversial chapter as “In Amerika” highlights an overlooked role for counseling professionals in the 1970s. Rather than subscribing entirely to the pathologized, treatment-oriented view of homosexuality, some professionals turned to Lesbian Liberation and other such organizations as viable alternatives. In a similar example, Monica Reynolds describes her struggle to fight depression: “life at times is a hell of a drag...living in a shadow is dark and dreary, and I, like a flower, could die from lack of sunshine.” Importantly, though, Reynolds describes a positive relationship with her therapist. She has had therapy that “has helped me to understand and accept myself; and although I am frustrated and depressed at times, I do not consider myself sick.”<sup>92</sup> Reynolds makes an important distinction. Although she faces enormous social pressure to mask her identity, and feels completely isolated from any sort of community, Reynolds has fully accepted herself, and even asks Lesbian Liberation for information that would help her

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<sup>90</sup> In the chapter, Lesbian Liberation recommends that, for a woman who is “deeply troubled and feels in need of help,” she look for group therapy where the leader and/or members are lesbian (like the Homophile Clinic in Boston), or visits a female psychologist who is herself part of Women’s Liberation: *OBOS*, 1973, pg. 65.

<sup>91</sup> Esther Parker, to Lesbian Liberation, 1979, Sugar Grove, Virginia; Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M47, box 10, folder 286.

<sup>92</sup> Monica Reynolds, to Lesbian Liberation, July 11, 1973, Beverly, Massachusetts; Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M47, box 10, folder 286.



understand the lesbian cause and give her the tools necessary to “help someone else understand herself.” So while many letters highlight an institutionalized stubbornness among mental health professionals to encourage positive conceptions of homosexuality, certain examples indicate that counseling experiences in the 1970s were not entirely homogenous. These letters support the idea that mental health ideals in the 1970s (particularly in regard to homosexuality and mental illness) were in a dramatic state of flux, and that certain professionals more rapidly embraced the change than did others.

### Response by Straight Women

While letters from lesbian woman comprise a majority of the reader response to the first two editions of “In Amerika,” a sampling of letters written by self-identified straight women indicates that the influential *OBOS* chapter infiltrated further into American society than many scholars acknowledge. And many of the letters written by straight women express open-mindedness, support, and even love toward the lesbian authors they address. One letter, written by a straight thirty-two year old mother, begins: “To my sisters, I’ve just finished reading ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves.’ Loved it. Especially the part about gay women. I must have reread it three or four times...I got such strong, good feelings about it that I had to write.” Rebecca Johnson goes on to explain that “In Amerika” made her realize that “it’s OK to love women, that being gay goes beyond sexual preference...it’s also love, joy, happiness, pain, rejection, fear.”<sup>93</sup>

Encapsulated in these few brief sentences is the revelatory idea that, for many straight women, “In Amerika” was perhaps just as transformative an experience as it was for gay women. Indeed, while the chapter certainly offered information and support for gay or questioning women, it also

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<sup>93</sup> Rebecca Johnson, to Lesbian Liberation, undated, New York; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286.

provided an avenue through which straight women could reconsider previously held conceptions about homosexuality. Importantly, as Johnson's letter describes, this reconsideration often had broader ramifications for the relationship between gay and straight women in 1970s America. As she questions: "how can our daughters be one with all women if we [gay and straight women] are not one with each other?" At first glance, this probing comment highlights a clear divide between gay and straight women at the time of *OBOS*' initial publication. More importantly, though, it also illustrates a desire (in this case by a straight woman) to bridge that divide, to erase the boundaries solidified by lack of information and political friction.

Another letter, written in March of 1976 by Melissa Martin from Mattapan, Maine, supports this idea that "In Amerika" challenged straight women to reevaluate their opinions of gay women—frequently with positive result. As the author explains, "until recently, I too feared gay people, like so many others. And could not understand why people 'turned queer,' so to speak." Although she acknowledges that male homosexuality is still hard for her to understand, Martin can "see very well why women prefer other women to men." Importantly, Martin cites feminist ideology for her newfound acceptance of lesbianism. As she expresses her desire for her daughter to be raised in a society where her accomplishments are valued as much as men's, she seems to equate lesbianism with the ultimate form of feminist activism. Indeed, her conclusion presents the call for all women to unite (including lesbians): "we certainly couldn't do any worse than the men have, and could probably do better. We are the strong and beautiful guardians of life, the keepers of the flame, and no one must be allowed to strip our dignity from us."<sup>94</sup>

Strongly echoing the militant, passionate tone on much 1970s feminist rhetoric, this letter then

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<sup>94</sup> Melissa Martin to Lesbian Liberation, March 31, 1976, Mattapan, Maine; The Women's Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286.

seems to bridge the gap between sexualities, recognizing a more important shared bond as women.

While many straight women engage Lesbian Liberation in positive discussion, others view the opportunity more impartially. Departing from the unifying, supportive language classifying Martin's and Walker's responses, some letters address Lesbian Liberation as an impersonal source of information rather than a group of "sisters" united in activism.<sup>95</sup> A December 1975 letter expresses an arguably more critical view of "In Amerika." From the outset, Belinda Johnson informs the authors that "I am not gay, and I have no desire or tendencies to be gay or 'try out' lesbianism...nor am I pro Women's Liberation...but I am quite interested in you and your cause."<sup>96</sup> Upon initial analysis, this letter is remarkable in that it speaks to an unanticipated "In Amerika" audience—one that is quite admittedly staunchly straight and uninvolved in the feminist movement. And despite her lack of interest in joining the Women's Movement, Johnson highlights a somewhat widespread interest in learning more about lesbianism: "I daresay that many women, and men too, are interested in sexuality and alternate styles of living...this world is sadly uninformed and I think more groups like yours should have the willingness, interest, and courage to explain and inform." This quote brings up an interesting tension, however. Requesting more information about a lifestyle she admits to not understanding, Johnson nonetheless strives to maintain a strict boundary between her own identity and lesbianism.

A second subset of letters from straight readers presents a radically different response to "In Amerika." Specifically, these letters challenge the inclusion of a chapter about homosexuality in *OBOS*. Ethel Waters, in a 1975 letter from Portland, Oregon, presents her

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<sup>95</sup> Both Martin and Walker's letters are addressed to "my sisters."

<sup>96</sup> Belinda Johnson to Lesbian Liberation, December 10, 1975; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 2.

opinion: “I think all people should be informed of how their body functions...but I do not think information on homosexuality belongs in a book about anatomy. I do not believe homosexuality is a natural feeling. It is the same as incest.”<sup>97</sup> While Waters does not present a specific quarrel with the women’s health movement or women’s liberation, she strenuously objects to the inclusion of homosexuality as a viable lifestyle choice: “I believe that the mind of a homosexual is malfunctioning and should be treated. I am deeply concerned for all human beings, but I do not think all people are human beings...Hitler had the right idea of a superior race, but restricted his beliefs only to Jews.” Another letter also references Hitler. Sent from Lexington, KY, the letter informs the authors “you would do well to hide your pitiful selves and keep your nasty perversion hidden. We will have to crush out Jews again (pity Hitler didn’t finish the job), and you...will be first.”<sup>98</sup> The malicious tone advanced in these letters echoes broader societal mores regarding homosexuality at the time; harshly anti-Semitic sentiment makes it clear that homosexuality is perceived as a categorical threat distinct from the rest of feminism. The language used to describe homosexuality also merits consideration. “Malfunctioning,” “perversion,” “same as incest”—all point to the belief that homosexuality stems from an individual’s mental or physical failings, rather than the breakdown of social morals.

Other dissenting letters are not framed in quite so vitriolic a tone. One response, written by a male sexologist in July of 1973, expresses his displeasure at both the “In Amerika” chapter and lesbian activism in general: “I read your very interesting article, but I was rather shocked at the form it was written in. You speak of liberating yourselves, but you’re still afraid of people, and what they have to say about lesbianism and homosexuality...I can’t condone the fact that

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<sup>97</sup> Ethel Waters to Lesbian Liberation, April 15, 1975, Portland, Oregon; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286.

<sup>98</sup> Anonymous to Lesbian Liberation, June 19, 1979, Lexington, Kentucky; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 3.

most of you are outright cowards.”<sup>99</sup> The author continues for six pages to discuss the collective’s shortcomings, going so far as to assert that he “knows more about lesbianism than [they] do.” Seeking neither information nor conversation, this somewhat condescending letter is a sharp contrast to those sent by straight supporters looking to engage Lesbian Liberation in conversation. As one of the few male responses to “In Amerika,” however, it gains a different significance. This letter from a man confirms that *OBOS* and “In Amerika” successfully crossed the gender gap.<sup>100</sup> While Johnson speaks disparagingly of Lesbian Liberation’s motivations and knowledge, he has nonetheless taken the time to read “In Amerika.” Unlike so many of the letters from lesbian women and straight supporters, however, such letters of censure as Johnson’s seemed to view their response as a way to advance personal viewpoints rather than engaging with the ideas opened up by “In Amerika”’s widespread distribution.

### Research Requests

While many letters written by both lesbian and straight women request more information about lesbianism for their own personal consideration, another subset of reader response desires to join the growing community of scholars studying and writing about sexuality. The letters written to Lesbian Liberation with direct research requests highlight a growing academic interest, in the 1970s, in the lesbian experience as it was shaped by both the medical institution and broader society.<sup>101</sup> By soliciting information on such diverse subjects as lesbian mothers,

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<sup>99</sup> Phil Johnson to Lesbian Liberation, July 19, 1973, Lucasville, Ohio; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 3.

<sup>100</sup> Although men were an active presence in feminist organizations in the 1970s, very few chose to write response letters to Lesbian Liberation: Of the roughly 250 letters sampled, 6 were from men.

<sup>101</sup> As one letter notes, most of the available information about homosexuality relates to gay men. Scholarship on lesbian women is much more difficult to find: Glenda Williams, to Lesbian Liberation, 1973, Boston, Massachusetts; The Women’s Education Center Archives at Snell Library, M 47, box 10, folder 286.

psychiatry and legal issues, these letters indicate a growing conception of academic pursuits as a means to affect change.

College-age women wrote a majority of the research requests.<sup>102</sup> Although the field of women's studies was in its infancy in the 1970s, reader responses detail a rich body of emerging scholarship.<sup>103</sup> Health collectives similar to the BWHBC produced their own research and literature. In a 1977 letter from the University of Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective, Anna Grant speaks of her collective's desire to compile an annotated bibliography solely devoted to lesbian health care.<sup>104</sup> In her letter, Grant addresses Lesbian Liberation as a clear authority on all matters related to lesbian health; she indicates that her collective would rely largely upon pamphlets, bibliographies, or newsletters recommended by Lesbian Liberation in order to produce their own information. Importantly, however, the letter's tone is far from deferential. In her introduction, Anna writes: "as we all know, lesbian health care is an area that needs attention and development—there is so little available information." Her informal use of "we" situates Lesbian Liberation and the University of Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective (or at least the lesbian section to which Anna belongs) as united players in the struggle for equitable, representational healthcare. This focus on shared information appears particularly strong in the

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<sup>102</sup> Some research requests were written to the collective by high school and even junior high students. An anonymous 15-year-old student from Bellevue, Washington writes to that she is "in need of information dealing with Lesbian civil rights and would also like information about whom [she] could contact here in Seattle to be a guest speaker at [her] Junior High." Crucially, letters such as this depict a diverse feminist activist culture. Although perhaps a more subtle endeavor than the visible rallies organized by many college-age feminists, this desire to bring a lesbian speaker to her Junior High is nonetheless a political statement. In an era in which health professionals, religious institutions, and many American citizens discussed homosexuality as a disease, the instances of positive discussion stand out: Anonymus, letter to Lesbian Liberation, May 22, 1973; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 1. For more examples of high school research requests, see BWHBC Records, MC 503, folder 2 (1977 letter from a Junior at RL Turner High School in Dallas, Texas).

<sup>103</sup> The first accredited women's studies course started at Cornell in 1969: Ju, Anne. "Women's Studies at Cornell Evolves Over 40-year History to Include Sexual Minorities." *Chronicle Online*. Accessed 21 January, 2013; <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/Nov09/WSHistory.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Anna Grant, to Lesbian Liberation, April 27, 1977, Santa Cruz, California; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 2.

context of a united sisterhood of women's health movement participants. The letter's emphasis on a common experience as members of a health collective then not only speaks to the intensely interconnected networks of feminist health activists in the 1970s, but also Lesbian Liberation and the BWHBC's central role in uniting and informing such a community.

While letters from University health collectives attest to broad networks of information sharing, letters from individual college students seeking assistance in writing papers and giving presentations highlight an even more widespread educational network resonating out of "In Amerika"'s publication. In her 1974 letter, Leslie Jacobs describes one such project. For her Speech class at Westchester State College, Leslie has chosen to argue that homosexuality is not an illness. She was recently "told that the official diagnostic manual of the American Psychological Association recently changed their definition of the homosexual, stating that they indeed were not sick."<sup>105</sup> In order to feel comfortable using the fact as part of her speech, Leslie then decides to corroborate it with another source she feels to be legitimate—Lesbian Liberation. So not only is Lesbian Liberation involved in an informal process of information sharing, but they are also at the center of an intentional assault on social conceptions of homosexuality as an illness. And many letters mirror Leslie's desire to challenge medical conceptions of homosexuality. Written largely by college age women in both specified "women's studies" classes and as part of individual projects for classes not related to gender or sexuality, these letters all highlight not only a growing willingness to discuss sexuality as an academic and personal subject, but also to challenge existing norms regarding mental health, parenting, and general social identities.

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<sup>105</sup> Leslie Jacobs, to Lesbian Liberation, February 3, 1974, Westchester, Pennsylvania; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 1. The APA decided—after much debate—to remove homosexuality from the DSM in December 1973. Their decision also included opposition to discrimination against gay men and women: Minton. *Departing from Deviance*, pg. 260-261.

It is also crucial to note that many of these women challenging the status quo specify a heterosexual identity. Karen Kotkin, a student at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay, is quite blunt about the subject: “I am straight, but I feel that I will accept you and you can accept me.” Further discussing her experience with “In Amerika,” Kotkin reflects that “what I have really learned through my reading is that gay people are not sick and perverted. They also do not just live for sex, which so many people seem to think.”<sup>106</sup> While perhaps not her first serious encounter with homosexuality, “In Amerika” was clearly a formative experience. Challenging her to reflect upon the conservative ideals espoused by her “family oriented town,” the chapter’s nuanced depiction of lesbian life has given Kotkin both the information she needs to complete her class project on homosexuality and also the perspective she needs to resituate her personal beliefs on the subject. The repeated use of the term “homosexual” presents one highly visible difference between letters like Karen’s—written by straight women quite removed from any gay community—and those written by lesbian or straight women within the women’s movement.

### Medical Professionals

“In Amerika” clearly articulates problems with medical health professionals. Describing them as insensitive to issues of sexuality and ill-equipped—educationally and professionally—to provide comprehensive healthcare for their lesbian patients, the chapter’s description of physicians in the early 1970s is certainly supported by other first hand patient accounts. A fourth subset of response letters, however, challenges the extension of this patriarchal narrative to all members of the medical profession.<sup>107</sup> A small but rich collection of letters from readers within the medical and care-giving community highlights a notion unmentioned in previous *OBOS*

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<sup>106</sup> Karen Kotkin, to Lesbian Liberation, undated; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 2.

<sup>107</sup> For primary source accounts of feminist sentiment toward physicians in the 1970s and 80s, see Frankfurt, Ellen. *Vaginal Politics*. New York: Bantam, 1973 and Arditti, Rita et al. *Test-Tube Women*. Pandora Press, 1984.



scholarship—the idea that members of the medical community were inspired by *OBOS* and “In Amerika” to engage with the women’s health movement in a productive conversation focused on change.

A 1977 letter from a second year student at Albany Medical College is particularly salient. In her request, Kate Walker informs the Collective (addressing them as “Gentlewomen”) that she is disappointed in the lack of discussion of lesbianism in her medical school curriculum; she notes that while there are two lecture on gay male sexuality, no mention is made of lesbianism. She further concludes that she, and her fellow classmates, are lacking in access to information of any kind regarding lesbianism, and she would like Lesbian Liberation to send “some reading material which would give people like myself an introduction to the idea of lesbianism.”<sup>108</sup> Expanding her focus beyond personal edification, Walker also plans to incorporate any information she receives into curricular changes for next years’ medical students. In this way, she proposes to work within a damaged institution to modernize and expand its teaching potential. While it is unclear whether Walker was motivated to address these curricular problems solely by what she read in “In Amerika,” it is clear that she viewed the chapter, and its authors, as important players in an emerging conversation about medical education.

Another letter, from a psychiatric nurse, echoes Walker’s call for informed change in medical practice. Employed on a female in-patient ward, Jane Kahn asks for literature to help her understand and help her lesbian patients. From the outset, Kahn admits her ignorance about lesbianism. She then goes further than seeking information, and questions the very foundation of her medical education regarding sexuality:

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<sup>108</sup> Kate Walker, to Lesbian Liberation, January 11, 1977; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 2.

“Another aspect of female homosexuality that I am interested in is etiology. As you probably have guessed, most of my orientation is medical so the medical model is what I have been taught. Yet I am not sure this is accurate. Do lesbian women feel that parental factors were significant in their turning to other women or is that what the medical profession believes only? Was a positive homosexual experience at puberty the underlying factor? Or are there other reasons or no reasons?”<sup>109</sup>

Kahn minces no words in this letter. She offers the opinion that her medical training might be wrong, and recognizes Lesbian Liberation as an authoritative source on the matter. In this way, Kahn’s letter is an excellent anthropological tool. As she ponders lesbian etiology (does sexuality stem from parenting, or from positive experiences?), or observes that straight patients on her ward fear seduction by the lesbian patients, Kahn likely voices commonly held sentiments within the medical community at the time.

While a majority of these responses originate from young women embarking on new careers in medical fields—perhaps an unsurprising locus for internal challenge to a patriarchal institution—the missives are not limited to one gender, or one age group, or one specific profession. Furthermore, letters from professionals only tangentially related to the medical institution outnumber those from nurses, doctors, and medical students on a roughly 2:1 basis. Such letters—from sociologists, crisis center operators, mental health hotline specialists, and even lawyers—exhibit extreme willingness to engage with “In Amerika”’s social critique.<sup>110</sup> A 1974 letter from Hank Roberts, Professor of Sociology at Utah State University, indicates that some *OBOS* readers viewed “In Amerika” as a barometer of changing circumstance, a pivotal moment for personal and societal modification. In his letter, Roberts informs “Ms.” that “as I am an instructor here and as I desire to understand all members of society I would appreciate any and all direction you could give me so that I might truly understand and appreciate

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<sup>109</sup> Jane Kahn, to Lesbian Liberation, July 28, 1977, Marshall, Michigan; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 2.

<sup>110</sup> For examples of such letters, see BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folders 1-3.

lesbianism.”<sup>111</sup> Implied in the text is the idea that any personal edification will be reflected in his teachings and will thereby encourage a broader discourse about sexuality.

Education remains a principal focus for all three of the letters discussed above. Walker, a student, Kahn, a practicing nurse, and Roberts, an instructor, all express a certain level of distrust in current medical ideas around homosexuality. By examining the topic from three different lenses, it is then possible to conclude that “In Amerika” resonated among a broad cross section of medical and other care-giving professionals. As these professionals write to express not only their support for Lesbian Liberation, but also their interest in using the Collective and its ideas to change the way young professionals are taught to conceive of homosexuality, they become—at least peripherally—members of the growing women’s health movement. Although certain language choices (namely the formal use of “to whom it may concern,” and “gentlewomen” in Walker and Kahn’s letters, respectively) attempt to create a barrier between the authors and Lesbian Liberation, the polite, engaged tone characterizing all three missives firmly defines the authors as willing supporters.

### The Collective Writes Back

While an analysis of response letters narrates diverse *OBOS* readers’ commitment to “In Amerika’s” social critiques, a consideration of the Collective’s responses to these letters presents an even more dynamic relationship. According to Roberts, the Collective responded to virtually every letter they received (with the exception of those along the lines of “go to hell you sick bastards”): “I remember stacks and stacks of them...oh my god, it was so depressing...my main memories are of people being completely isolated. As if they were the only one in the world. Women in the military who couldn’t come out...and when they found this book it was like a

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<sup>111</sup> Hank Roberts, to Lesbian Liberation, July 30, 1974, Logan, Utah; BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 1.

godsend. But they were mostly people steeped in depression and pain...and we would write back.”<sup>112</sup> She describes a list of resources the Collective developed—information about which cities had more open scenes, books with good information. The book list the Collective compiled and distributed is particularly telling. The document centralizes the most relevant non-fiction and fictional representations of the lesbian experience available in the early and mid 1970s. With 29 books referenced on the list, it is clear that there is a small, though expanding, source of information for lesbian and questioning women. While some of the books on the list are non-fiction accounts of lesbian feminism—like Jill Johnston’s *Lesbian Nation* (1973) and Del Martin and Phyllis Johnson’s *Lesbian/Women* (1972)—or lesbian health issues—like Dr. George Weinburg’s *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*—many titles represent fictional accounts of the lesbian experience. From Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* (1928) to Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) and Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt* (1952), the resource guide lists such diverse fiction as a viable source of information.<sup>113</sup> Certainly, not all accounts are highly positive representations (in *Well of Loneliness*, the lesbian heroine forces her lover to marry a man so that she might achieve social acceptance). The books nonetheless allow readers to connect with a communal history and imagine an experience of their own.<sup>114</sup> As Roberts remembers in her interview, the Collective would send these booklists to both gay and straight men and women who requested more information about lesbianism. They also, to the best of their ability, provided isolated gay women with information about local gay and lesbian organizations.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Miller and Roberts Interview, December 9, 2012.

<sup>113</sup> “Books on Lesbianism,” date unknown. The BWHBC Records, MC 503, box 159, folder 2.

<sup>114</sup> Historian Yvonne Keller argues that fiction about lesbians (especially lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s) “supplied a nourishment” in the form of “lesbian representation” that was crucial to many lesbians’ positive self realization: Keller, Yvonne. “Was it Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife so Passionately?” *American Quarterly*. 57, no. 2 (June 2005): 385.

<sup>115</sup> Miller and Roberts Interview, December 9, 2012.

And it is apparent that the information was well received. Lesbian Liberation had a response system for their letters in which an initial reader would either mark the type of response needed (ie. “send book list”) or answer the letter herself. Once a letter received a response, it was dated, initialed, and filed away. Many lesbian women, “starved for good reading materials about the gay world,” or looking for a source of support and guidance, wrote to Lesbian Liberation multiple times.<sup>116</sup> One reader exchanged multiple letters with Sarah, a Collective member. In one exchange, she writes “you wrote me in May after I’d written twice before...I want to thank you for your support and the information. Last night I got up the courage to call a Gay-Lesbian Rap Line in Omaha, Nebraska. I was scared, but the conversation was very helpful.” Most powerfully, the author asserts “if it weren’t for your letter, I probably would of hid my feelings and ignored them.”<sup>117</sup> The sentiment expressed in this letter (and echoed in so many more in the collection) highlights the integral, dynamic role Lesbian Liberation and “In Amerika” played in the formation and strengthening of a viable, visible lesbian community in the 1970s. The Collective not only articulated their own experiences and challenges in order to educate others, but also took an active interest in spreading information and support on a more individual basis. By responding to every single request for further knowledge or advice, Lesbian Liberation empowered an informal lesbian support network around the nation.

## **Conclusion**

My analysis of BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation correspondence and memos, *OBOS* publications, and a diverse array of reader responses establishes that “In Amerika” played an

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<sup>116</sup> Janet Robichek to Lesbian Liberation, 6 September 1973, Pontiac, Michigan. The Women’s Education Center Record at Snell Library, box 10, folder 286.

<sup>117</sup> Megan Mitchell to Sarah of Lesbian Liberation, 4 August, 1979. The Women’s Education Center Records at Snell Library, box 10, folder 286.

immensely important role in defining the complex space lesbianism occupied in the 1970s. Not only did it identify challenges experienced by “out” lesbians, but the chapter also provided a network of support for those women unable or unwilling to openly claim a lesbian identity. The tempestuous relationship between members of the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation highlights the gay collective’s productive role within the women’s health movement as well. Lesbian Liberation directly challenged the BWHBC; their commitment to radicalism encouraged the more liberal Collective to clearly define its priorities. Most significantly, Lesbian Liberation—in its adamant demand for its own chapter in *OBOS*—forced the BWHBC to defend the validity of a lesbian chapter to a mainstream publishing agency. The collective members, through their presence in multiple areas of leftist activism in Boston, also pushed back against this idea of a strict divide between gay and straight activists at the time.

The first two editions of “In Amerika” (1973 and 1976) expanded access to information about homosexuality while at the same time challenging readers and authors to explore the issues lesbians faced in navigating both current healthcare systems and broader social norms. Crucially, “In Amerika” sparked a conversation about lesbianism that went beyond the borders of the women’s health movement. Some of that conversation reveals lingering prejudice toward homosexuality. A larger percentage of the readers’ response letters, however, engage with “In Amerika” to reconsider traditional notions of illness and deviancy. Particularly among younger health professionals, the chapter provided an occasion to consider intentional changes to the healthcare establishment. As important as shaping these widespread conversations about lesbianism, “In Amerika” also constructed the possibility of a lesbian existence for many readers. By laying out common problems, feelings, and experiences with unapologetic pride, the chapter

advances lesbianism as a healthy identity; it frames the medical establishment, with its discrimination of lesbianism, as the diseased entity.

But while “In Amerika” was crucial in shaping identities at the time, it is important to remember that the chapter was also a product of its time. Its commitment to political lesbianism and its radical, polarizing language firmly ground the work in the 1970s era of radical lesbian feminism. Although later *OBOS* editions would continue to include chapters on alternative sexuality (modern chapters abandoned “lesbian” in their titles in favor of the more encompassing “queer” identity), none would exhibit the politically charged, militantly assertive, wonderfully illuminating tone that so characterizes “In Amerika.”<sup>118</sup> The “In Amerika” chapter is thus a barometer for lesbian involvement in a broader women’s health movement. Although it is necessary to expand this study beyond one collective and one book, the detailed story of “In Amerika”’s creation demands attention. In this paper, the rich archival collections documenting the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation are linked in what I argue to be one of the most comprehensive studies of lesbian presence in the creation and dispersion of *OBOS* in the 1970s. Both the complex relationship detailed in internal meeting minutes and personal interviews and the diversity of reader response letters highlight previously unconsidered dynamics in the story of a book that remains at the heart of the women’s health movement.

Word Count: 12,437

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<sup>118</sup> Lindsey, Elizabeth Sarah. “Reexamining Gender and Sexual Orientation: Revisioning the Representation of Queer and Trans People in the 2005 Edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 184-189. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 7, 2012).

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## **Bibliographic Essay**

I chose to focus my essay on the “In Amerika They Call Us Dykes” chapter of *OBOS* after I noticed *OBOS* was one of the few books written during the women’s health movement in the 1970s that devoted a significant amount of attention to lesbianism. These other books—recommended by my advisor as the most influential studies of the movement—included Ellen Frankfurt’s *Vaginal Politics*, Rita Arditti, Renate Delli Klein and Sheeley Minden’s *Test Tube Women*, Claudia Dreifus’ *Seizing Our Bodies*, and Sheryl Ruzek’s *The Women’s Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control*. Although some of the works (in particular Ruzek’s sociological study, based on her years of participant observation) briefly mentioned lesbian activism within the feminist health movement, I chose to focus my study on the early *OBOS* because it offered the richest depiction of lesbian in American society in the 1970s, detailing not only relevant health issues, but also broader social experiences. In order to explore not only these detailed experiences, but also the reason behind so much literary silence on the topic of homosexuality, I chose to explore “In Amerika” and *OBOS* during its creation and its dissemination. I wanted to consider not only its impact on its readers, but also the manner in which it was drafted.

Much of my initial research was exploratory. I read Wendy Kline’s *Bodies of Knowledge* and Kathy Davis’ *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*—two of the most comprehensive studies of *OBOS* and the BWHBC—and discovered the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective archival collection at Harvard’s Schlessinger Archives. Further internet research revealed that the Women’s Educational Center Archives at Northeastern’s Snell Library also housed relevant material—particularly about Lesbian Liberation, the gay collective that produced “In Amerika.” A visit to both these archives yielded an enormous diversity of

information. I found extensive meeting minutes and internal correspondence documenting years of BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation meetings. I read drafts and edits of early *OBOS* chapters. And, to my great interest, I discovered hundreds of readers' letters, mailed to Lesbian Liberation in response to "In Amerika"'s publication. These letters spanned decades, from 1973 in to the 1990s. While many were redacted, I was nonetheless able to uncover an amazing breadth of information. Men and women from across the country—characterized by a diversity in racial, educational, socio economic, age, and sexual identities—wrote to the Collective to express support or censure, ask questions, and tell stories. I found the letters to be fascinating—the information to be mined from their contents went far beyond the brief mention provided in Wendy Kline's work.

The archival material from Schlesinger (BWHBC Records, MC 503 and 667) and Snell Library (The Women's Education Center Records, M47) provided a strong foundation for my paper. The BWHBC Records contained meeting minutes from weekly BWHBC meetings from the early 1970s through the end of the 1970s—the entire period of concern for my paper. Although there were multiple boxes of records, I skimmed all of the folders for relevant material. I found several discussions of—especially in the early- to mid-1970s—interactions with the women writing "the gay chapter." At these initial stages of my research, a big challenge was to piece together "In Amerika"'s creation story in its entirety. The Women's Education Center Records at Northeastern University proved extremely useful in this endeavor. Lesbian Liberation, the gay collective that wrote the chapter, existed under the umbrella of the Women's Center. As such, internal minutes and memos in the collection document Lesbian Liberation's placement in Boston feminist and lesbian organizing. I was able to use these sources to

supplement the sparse accounts in the BWHBC Records and better contextualize, in my mind, “In Amerika”’s placement within *OBOS*.

Both the BWHBC and Women’s Education Center Records contained numerous reader response letters. While the Women’s Education Center Records were somewhat scattered, with all the letters housed somewhat sporadically within one folder, the BWHBC Records organized hundreds of letters by date. Those containing sensitive or personal material were redacted (only names were left out). I focused my research efforts heavily on these response letters. I skimmed all of the letters in the Women’s Education Center Records, and roughly half from each folder of the BWHBC Records. I took notes about and pictures of 250 of the most relevant, informative letters for later use. Further consideration would divide the letters into the 4 categories of response detailed in the essay. One weakness of my research method was that I could not closely examine all of the letters in the BWHBC Collection. I made two day long trips to the archive, but due to the sheer size of the collection, had to randomly sample roughly one half of the letters in each folder. In earlier years, I was able to examine closer to 2/3 of each folder. And as I was still able to look at over 200 letters from the collection, I am confident that the diversity of responses described in my paper mirrors that of the responses in the entire collection.

My time spent in these two archives, while extremely productive, nonetheless left gaps in my knowledge. Particularly as I tried to flesh out the dynamic between the BWHBC and Lesbian Liberation, I found brief mentions from the archives and generalized statements in secondary literature to be somewhat elusive and frustrating. An oral history interview conducted with two members of Lesbian Liberation helped enormously in rounding out the story. The interview yielded an approximately 30-page transcript and detailed nuances of lesbian and feminist organizing in Boston that completely escaped mention in my other primary and secondary

sources. It especially helped illuminate the struggle to secure “In Amerika”’s place in *OBOS* in light of Simon & Schuster’s desire to include it as part of the mental health chapter. One issue that I encountered during the interview process was that my recording of the interview cut out for about a minute in the middle. Fortunately my handwritten notes were able to fill in some of what was lost. A second weakness I would have liked to address was the lack of variety in my interview sample. I feel that a larger number of interviews would have yielded a greater diversity of information. Time and travel constraints, however, prevented such an endeavor.

I supplemented this productive archival and interview research with a collection of primary source literature written during the 1970s health movement. I read through anthologies like Barbara Crow’s *Radical Feminism* and manifestos like Ellen Frankfurt’s *Vaginal Politics* in order to contextualize lesbian activism in the broader women’s health movement. One of the most useful primary source documents was Sheryl Ruzek’s *The Women’s Health Movement*. In this sociological study of the movement, Ruzek detailed her experience as a participant observer. Tellingly, she mentioned lesbianism 3 separate times. While it is possible that, in my research, I failed to encounter existing feminist health literature that *did* give significant voice to lesbian concerns, I feel that the literature I examined was quite representational of the entire movement. Many of the authors were at the heart of health organizing at the time.

In addition to extensive primary research, I utilized secondary sources to contextualize feminist and lesbian experiences from the 1950s through the 1970s. I relied heavily upon Wendy Kline and Kathy Davis’ work as the most comprehensive existing scholarship on *OBOS*, the BWBHC, and lesbian activism. The content of my essay aimed at supplementing their observations of a lesbian presence within *OBOS* and the feminist health community. I found Alice Echols, Liliian Faderman, and Flora Davis to be excellent references for the development

of feminist activism in the 1970s—particularly as it related to lesbianism. As I had not previously devoted much research to homosexuality and the mental health professions, Henry Minton’s book on the depathologization of homosexuality proved quite useful as well. One of my regrets about this essay is that I felt I had to sacrifice some incredibly rich secondary source contextualization in order to keep my words within the limit. Because I found such compelling information in the response letters, I regret that I was not able to address all the facets at hand. Most significantly, I was not able to fully explore the conservative backlash against alluded to in secondary scholarship about *OBOS*.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my senior essay experience was the primary source research. When I entered the archives, I had very little idea what to expect. I had perused the online finding aid, so I knew there were reader response letters somewhere in the collection. I was unprepared, however, for the intense emotional connection I forged with the authors of these letters; I felt drawn to share their stories with a wider audience than just myself. The oral history interviews were also a profound experience. The melding of present day perspectives with such a politically charged past provided a unique insight that I feel personalized the information included in my essay. If given the opportunity, I would extend my study of lesbian involvement in the women’s health movement along these personal lines. It is only by collecting and synthesizing so many individual histories that established narratives can be productively challenged and enhanced.