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Article

Feminist Separatism Revisited

Kate M. Phelan [1] and Holly Lawford-Smith [2,*]

[1] RMIT University, School of Global, Urban, and Social Studies, Melbourne, Australia
[2] University of Melbourne, Department of Philosophy, Melbourne, Australia
* Corresponding author: holly.lawford-smith@unimelb.edu.au

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Abstract: Conflict over who belongs in women-only spaces is now part of mainstream political debate. Some think women-only spaces should exclude on the basis of sex, and others think they should exclude on the basis of a person's self-determined gender identity. Many who take the latter view appear to believe that the only reason for taking the former view could be antipathy towards men who identify as women. In this paper, we'll revisit the second-wave feminist literature on separatism, in order to uncover the reasons for women-only spaces as feminists originally conceived them. Once these reasons are understood, those participating in debates over women-only spaces will be in a better position to adjudicate on whether shifting from sex to gender identity puts any significant interests at stake.

Keywords: feminism; separatism; radical feminism; lesbian separatism; second-wave; women-only spaces; women's interests; women's liberation

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Conflict between feminists over who belongs in women-only spaces has spilled out of feminist movement and theory and into the mainstream. Now more and more people are becoming aware of the issues, and being asked to take sides. If it's self-identification as a woman alone that settles the matter, then everything that was socially designated as being "for women only" (previously understood as a sex class) undergoes a change in constituency, from a single-sex group to a mixed-sex group (albeit one that is still dominated by one sex).

It's hard to say whether this is bad – and if so, how bad it is – without knowing more about the interests served by having spaces that are women-only in the sex class sense. Our aim in this paper is to return to a literature now largely abandoned by contemporary feminists – the feminist theory of the second wave, starting in the early (and blossoming in the late) 1960s – in order to present the reasons for feminist separatism as feminists

originally conceived them.[1] If important interests are advanced by sex separation, and these interests would be set back by a change to separation based on gender identity, that would be a reason to resist the change.

1. Women-Only Spaces

What is a women-only space? Typically, it is a physical space where women meet face-to-face. (Unless we signal it explicitly, when we talk about women in this paper we'll mean members of the female sex class). In some cases, women-only spaces protect vulnerability of one kind or another. Sex-separated changing rooms, fitting rooms, and public bathrooms are all examples of women-only spaces which protect women in contexts involving full or partial nudity. Rape and domestic abuse recovery groups are both examples of women-only spaces which protect women in contexts involving emotional and psychological vulnerability.

But there are other kinds of spaces that should also be considered under the same umbrella, including online spaces. A women-only 12-step group for drug and alcohol addiction – which offers women a space to recover in the company of other women who may share similar histories of sexual abuse, domestic violence, or other trauma at the hands of men – may be held online, as many things were during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online meeting becomes a virtual women-only space.

For the purposes of this paper, we'll include the following as women-only spaces: rape and domestic violence refuges, shelters, hospital wards, fitting rooms, changing rooms, bathrooms, gyms, sports, spas, accommodations, schools, shortlists, quotas, prizes, prisons, political groups, events, festivals, clubs, and dating apps. This list is not exhaustive, but it covers the main categories we'll be interested in, and serves to illustrate the breadth of the spaces that are at issue. These spaces have different types of rationales, including protecting women's safety, privacy, dignity, and comfort (e.g. women-only changing rooms); securing fair competition (e.g. women's sports) and justice (e.g. women-only political party shortlists); facilitating support networks through shared bodily experience (e.g. breastfeeding support groups); providing respite (e.g. university campus women's rooms); scaffolding women's self-determination (e.g. women's political action groups); facilitating intimate association between women (e.g. women's clubs); and honouring the intentions and hard work of the spaces' creators (e.g. rape and domestic violence shelters established by women for women).[2]

There are two related questions that should be kept distinct. One, as just mentioned, is about the rationale for the women-only spaces we happen to have now. We can ask what interests they serve for the women who use them; whether it is important that they continue to exist; and whether they would still protect those interests if they were to be opened up to people who are not women. The other is more fundamental, about what having *women-only space* (at all, in some form or other) does or can do for women. These questions come apart; it could be that women-only space is important for reasons that would justify having certain *types* of spaces that we no longer have, or have never had. And it could be that existing women-only spaces serve interests that are not feminist interests (for us, feminist interests are the interests of women *qua women*, rather than

[1] See also Freedman (1979); Anderson (1994); Rudy (2001, pp. 190–206); Enszer (2016); Mims (2019).

[2] Here we follow the discussion in Lawford-Smith (2023, ch. 4). On the last rationale, a parallel can be made with wills and bequests.

women *qua people*).[3] In this paper, we focus on the more fundamental question of what justifies having spaces that are women-only *at all* (i.e. regardless of the type of space it is and what specific interests it serves). Why is it important, if it is, that sometimes women are together without men? To answer this question we turn to the second-wave feminists' – and particularly the radical feminists' – discussion of separatism.

2. Separatism[4]

While separatism is not a necessary commitment of feminism, many radical feminists were separatists, to one degree or other.[5] Some were separatists to the degree that they avoided association with men as far as practically possible.[6] Some withdrew from male-dominated society entirely, choosing to live together with other women only, on women's lands (and some of the collectives who administered these lands refused to even let women with children have their sons on the lands).[7] Others remained within the dominant society, but withdrew from sexual and romantic relationships with men, devoting their energies to women (which did not mean entering into sexual or romantic relationships with women instead, although some did).[8] Yet others remained in intimate association with men, but nonetheless valued the political and other types of spaces where they could spend time with women only.[9]

The disagreement between feminists today is not about whether women should have anything to do with men. Feminists have largely given up on full separatism (although

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3 For further discussion of this distinction, see Lawford-Smith & Phelan (2022).

4 We don't have space to mention all the relevant material here, but Hoagland & Penelope (1988) collects together a range of second-wave feminist material on separatism, and is an extremely helpful guide to the breadth of different views at the time. There are also useful essays in Allen (1990), esp. Card (1990) and Lee (1990); and in Morgan (1970), esp. Weisstein (1970) and Shelly (1970).

5 We both accept a minimalist definition of radical feminism: that women are a sex caste. See further discussion in Lawford-Smith (2022) and Phelan (*ms*. 2023) For discussion of separatism being a matter of degree, see Murphy (2020).

6 For example one collective said "We do not want to fraternize with men, our enemy", and even when it came to strategic coalitions, they conceded the possibility of working with men only "in the face of terrible repression"; Alice, Gordon, Debbie, & Mary ([1973] 1988, p. 34).

7 See the discussion about women's lands in Australia in the film *Brazen Hussies* (2020), and in the two volumes of essays Hall (2016; 2019).

8 Alix Dobkin wrote in 1982 that "there seems to be an unspoken, undefined myth of 'the Lesbian Separatist' who never, ever chooses to interact with men and who expects all women to do likewise. For me, Lesbian Separatism has always meant a consciousness, an analysis, and a commitment to the well-being, and best interests of women in general and Lesbians in particular" Hoagland & Penelope (1988, pp. 286–287). Martha Shelly made an interesting observation about the relation between lesbian sexual or political orientation and having a negative attitude toward men: 'Lesbians, because they are not afraid of being abandoned by men, are less reluctant to express hostility toward the male class – the oppressors of women. Hostility toward your oppressor is healthy, but the guardians of modern morality, the psychiatrists, have interpreted this hostility as an illness, and they say this illness causes and is Lesbianism' (*ibid,* p. 346). Laurene Kelly, writing in an Australian collection, said "The definition of lesbian included 'political' and 'sexual' lesbians. In other words, you did not have to have sex with another woman to identify as a lesbian. You supported the 'sisterhood' wholeheartedly, so therefore were a 'political' lesbian" Hall (2016, p. 14).

9 The French radical feminist activist Margeurite Stern talks about the value of the women-only squat she started on "Gender Critical Story Hour", Season 1 Episode 2, 'Margeurite Stern', 27.08; online at link to the article. Many of the visitors to Australian women's lands commented on the value of being outside of male society. For example one recalled "I remember feeling safe to wear or not wear clothes to the level of comfort that felt good in the ambient temperature. I had never known this before. The concept that women could be safe, partly clothed, was new" (Hall 2016, p. 43).

there are still some women's lands remaining),[10] and most feminists today no longer subscribe to the blanket view of men as "the enemy" or "the oppressor" that initially lead feminists to this creative solution.[11] It is also not about whether there should be *any* separation of men and women. It is largely accepted, by all parties to the disagreement, that there are some purposes for which it is acceptable or desirable for men and women to be separated. So while some people today oppose sex-separation in sport,[12] many more think such separation is fine, perhaps even important, but want to change the basis of separation from sex to gender identity (from being female, to self-identifying as a woman). At least a person who thought there should be no public distinction on the basis of sex could coherently and consistently support the destruction of women-only spaces. But the supporters of transwomen's inclusion in women-only spaces are not generally arguing for the destruction of women-only spaces, or the inclusion of *all men* in any such spaces. They want to make the spaces partially mixed-sex, but only as mixed-sex as is required to get transwomen in. So what we'll need to work out is whether compelling justifications for separatism – assuming there are some – are compatible with this partial inclusion.

Claudia Card says that there are four important aspects to separatism. These are i) who is to separate; ii) from whom; iii) the kinds of connection to be severed; and finally iv) the reason for severing those connections.[13] Because we're talking about feminist separatism and the justification of women-only spaces, the rough answers to i) and ii) are clear. It's *women* separating from *men*. But this leaves the controversy between transwomen-inclusive (transmen-exclusionary) and transmen-inclusive (transwomen-exclusionary) feminists open. Discussion of the kinds of connections to be severed and the reasons for severing those connections should help to illuminate what the more precise answers are: biological females from biological males; people socialised female from people socialised male; people with "woman" gender identities from people with "man" gender identities; something else entirely? While we won't attempt to defend one of those answers here, we hope that our discussion will be of use to readers who want to do so. We'll focus on Card's aspect iv) (from which an answer to iii) will fall out), bringing in relevant second-wave feminist (and occasionally other) literature as we go.

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[10] In Australia, there are 3,000 acres of connected women's lands in New South Wales, known as the Mountain, the Valley, and Herland; Hall (2016, pp. 5, 16).

[11] To give some examples: "we would not ever consider sleeping with men. Not because we hate men, which we do, but because (even if we could be attracted to a man, which is pretty far-fetched) all men are our enemy" Alice, Gordon, Debbie, & Mary ([1973] 1988, p. 34). Or, "Just as we believe that no woman should relate to a man, and rob herself of precious time and energy in trying to change one of our millions of male oppressors, we believe that no woman should relate to raising male children. … relating to male children is the same thing as relating to men, and we will never defeat supremacy by consorting with men' (*ibid,* p. 35). Kerryn Higgs, one of the original legal landowners for the first Australian women's land (originally "Amazon Acres" or "The Acres", and later "the Mountain", described radical feminists who were "fervent separatists" resigning from the collective with "a passionate letter, accusing the 'liberal humanists' in the collective of 'smilingly welcoming male voyeurs and vampires' and 'PREMATURE RECONCILIATION WITH THE ENEMY' (her capitals)" Hall (2019, pp. 108–109). Higgs says of full separatism "this issue has not divided the Mountain Co-Op for many years now' (*ibid,* p. 112). The Mountain went on to admit male visitors, while Herland and the Valley remained strictly women-only.

[12] See. e.g. McDonagh & Pappano (2007).

[13] Card (1990).

3. Reasons for Separating

Surveying the existing literature, we found four broad reasons for women's separation from men. These are that separation is a precondition for women's liberation, that separation itself is an act of resistance, that separation offers refuge, and that separation facilitates women's "recharging". We'll discuss each of these in turn.

Because our interest is strictly in reasons for separating, we'll be presenting only certain claims from within what was an extremely lively and passionate debate between feminist women of the second wave. Left to one side in our discussion are fierce debates about what it meant to be a "woman-identified-woman", including where that touched on the difference between "prefeminist or nonfeminist lesbians" and "political lesbians";[14] how full-time separatists (e.g. those living on women's lands or in women's cooperatives) should handle issues including women having boy children, the hiring of male contractors for specialist work, the desire of some women to have male visitors, and what counted as "patriarchal" and therefore needed to be excised from the new utopian communities – most controversially meat, machines, and drugs and alcohol;[15] how woman-only businesses, strongly supported by separatists, should handle the issue of hiring or otherwise accepting the volunteer labour of male transsexuals;[16] and whether it was permissible for women-only events to adopt an entry policy of "womyn-born womyn", meaning, those who were born female rather than those who identified or lived as women but had been born male.[17]

3.i. Separation as a precondition for women's liberation

Separation is a precondition for women's liberation in at least four ways: to the development of a new concept of woman; to the formation of women's culture; as a precondition for consciousness-raising; and to allow women to become powerful.

First, separation is necessary to the development of a new concept of woman. As Card says, "Separating as an alternative to assimilating or integrating has been important to replacing hostile with friendly self-concepts."[18] Radicalesbians[19] appear to have first articulated this view. They argue that the male-defined concept of woman is one who is sexually for a man, one who is to be fucked by a man. This concept denies women

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[14] "I also moved quickly into the lesbian community because there was a growing sentiment in feminist discourse that lesbianism was the most legitimate way to act out our politics. In the process of developing feminist theories rooted in the unique, caring nature of women, many theorists suggested that the best way to demonstrate such female sensitivity is by caring exclusively for other women. Thus, other ways of defining lesbianism emerged that were not always grounded in or defined by sexual activity … From the perspective of prefeminist or nonfeminist lesbians (e.g., the working-class butches and femmes who communicated largely through bar culture), a sexual identity rooted only in feminist politics was inherently suspicious. (From the radical feminist perspective, the older prefeminist lesbians were problematic because they reproduced heterosexual normativity in their femininity and butchness). Definite tensions existed between those who choose lesbian life for reasons of desire and those who choose it for feminist politics; each group imagined the other was inauthentic' Rudy (2001, p. 195).

[15] Hall (2016, pp. 36, 38; 2019); Radio National (2019a; 2019b).

[16] The best-known controversy is probably Olivia Records employing the transsexual sound engineer Sandy Stone. For discussion, see Enszer (2016, pp. 186–188); and within popular culture Hi-Phi Nation (2019).

[17] See discussion in Browne (2009; 2011).

[18] Card (1990, p. 127).

[19] Originally Lavender Menace then Lesbian Liberation, key members were Rita Mae Brown and Cynthia Funk (Rapp 2015).

an independent existence. Indeed, "for a woman to be independent means she can't be a woman – she must be a dyke".[20] In addition, this concept is, they say, a source of self-hatred, which serves to push women away from one another. Seeing reflected in other women their own secondary status, their own degraded selves, women turn away from one another and seek identification instead with men.

Women must therefore create a new self-concept. Only women can create such a concept. "That identity", Radicalesbians say, "we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men."[21] We are not sure whether their reason for thinking this was that men cannot, *qua* oppressor, create a concept of woman that will release women from their oppression, or that were men to create a concept of woman (whatever the concept), women would remain defined by – the product of – men, and would in that sense remain dependent on men.

In order to create this new self-concept, they thought women must "disengag[e] from male-defined response patterns",[22] must withdraw from men and commit to women. "[W]e must be available and supportive to one another, give our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. Our energies must flow toward our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors."[23]

Marilyn Frye makes a similar argument. Women cannot overcome their oppression if they cannot imagine surviving it, which is to say, if they cannot imagine themselves as other than men have defined them. In order to imagine themselves as such, they require "support", the support of a semantic community in which their imagining is intelligible.[24] Presumably, such a community must exclude men, who, having the status of semantically authoritative, will succeed in undermining women's efforts to redefine woman.

Second, separation is necessary to the formation of a women's culture. Women are unique among minority groups in being without a culture of their own. Dispersed among men, they acquire the patriarchal culture. Other minority groups, having cultures of their own, have memories of who they were prior to their persecution, countervailing images of who they are. Sheila Rowbotham argues that women, having no culture of their own, have no such images, and having no such images "experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness".[25] She observes that even our myths of strong women are the creation of male culture.[26] Other minority groups require a space in which to practice their culture; women require a space in which to develop one.

Through an historical analysis of the women's movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Estelle Freedman argues that women's culture is integral to feminist politics, constituting as it does a source of personal and political strength for women. In the late nineteenth century, the women's movement pursued separate female organising and institution-building. This, Freedman says,

> helped to re-establish common bonds long veiled by the retreat from women's institutions into privatized families or sexually integrated, but male-dominated, institutions. The groups encouraged the re-emergence of female networks and a new

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[20] Radicalesbians (1970, p. 2).
[21] *ibid*., p. 3.
[22] *ibid*., p. 3.
[23] *ibid*., p. 4.
[24] Frye (1983, pp. 80-81).
[25] In full: "People who are without names, who do not know themselves, who have no culture, experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness" (Rowbotham 1973, p. 27).
[26] *ibid*., p. 34.

> women's culture which in turn have given rise to female institution building – women's centres, health collectives, political unions, even new women's buildings …[27]

Having achieved suffrage, in the early twentieth century, the women's movement pursued instead integration with men. It was at this time that its strength began to decline. The strength of the women's movement, Freedman observes, tracks the presence of a women's culture. In light of this, Freedman urges the women's movement to revaluate and revive a women's culture.

While Freedman identifies a women's culture as *practically* integral to feminist politics, James Scott suggests that it is *epistemically* integral. He argues that the formation of a culture is prerequisite to resistance:

> It may be reasonable to conjure up an individual subordinate who resents appropriation and resists it by pilfering, who is angered by an insult and dreams of striking back, who finds the rationale of his rulers unacceptable and dreams of a utopia where the last shall be first. The fact is, however, that even pilfering requires the complicity of fellow subordinates who will look the other way, that dreams of settling scores for an insult will necessarily take a social form satisfying to peers and appropriately provoking to superiors, and that the negation of a dominant religious ideology requires an offstage subculture in which the negation can be formed and articulated.[28]

The formation of a culture is prerequisite to resistance because this culture is what gives meaning to acts of resistance, what makes them acts of resistance.

Third, separation is a precondition for consciousness-raising. MacKinnon suggests that men's absence was necessary to the consciousness-raising that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, explaining that it "helped women feel more free of the immediate imperative to compete for male attention and approval, to be passive or get intimidated, or to support men's version of reality".[29] Men must be absent if women are to voice the thoughts that will allow them to arrive at an alternative understanding of reality, one that challenges the male account, one according to which they are oppressed rather than merely in their natural place.[30]

In "Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo", Casey Hayden and Mary King explain how men's presence thwarts consciousness-raising:

> Some men seem to feel, when they hear conversations involving these problems, that they have a right to be present and participate in them, since they are so deeply involved. At the same time, very few men can respond non-defensively, since the whole idea is either beyond their comprehension or threatens and exposes them. The usual response is laughter. That inability to see the whole question as serious

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[27] Freedman (1979, p. 524).

[28] Scott (1990, p. 118).

[29] MacKinnon (1989, p. 86).

[30] Mary Daly says something similar: "What is happening is an emergence of woman-consciousness such as has never before taken place. It is unimaginative and out of touch with what is happening in the woman's movement to assume that the becoming of women will simply mean uncritical acceptance of structures, beliefs, symbols, norms, and patterns of behaviour that have been given priority by society under male domination. Rather, this becoming will act as catalyst for radical change in our culture. … What is at stake is a real leap in human evolution, initiated by women" Daly (1973, pp. 14, 37; quoted in Rudy (2001, p. 198).

> and as sociologically explainable often shapes our own response so that we learn to think in their terms about ourselves and to feel silly rather than trust our inner feelings.[31]

Bonnie Mann speaks of women's shelters as spaces in which battered women can "Re-member".[32] She says, "In a free space like the space provided by a group for battered women, it is possible to cultivate the practices of remembering/Re-membering that are essential to our struggle."[33] Imprisoned by their male partners, unable to see a way out, these women have had to "actively forget" reality, the reality of their battery, in order to continue to live with their lives. So, in order to escape once and for all, they must remember. In the presence of other women, women who have had similar experiences, and in the absence of men, Mann suggests, "the man in your head" is displaced and women can begin to hear their own voices.[34] They can begin to remember.

Challenging the assumption that certain women-only spaces such as the harem are only oppressive, Leila Ahmed insists that these spaces provide women with a freedom to exchange information and ideas, including about men.[35] Such information-sharing can allow women to realise that things they had presumed to be individual experiences are in fact shared; things they had presumed the result of their own individual failings and therefore deserved are in fact not; what they had presumed aberrational is in fact normal. Ahmed is not uncritical of such spaces; she acknowledges that men compel women into them, and confine women within them. Nevertheless, these spaces "fostered both an awareness of male oppression, and female independence of mind",[36] sewing the seed from which an explicit feminist consciousness could grow.

Fourth, separation allows women to become powerful. Separation has been seen as withdrawal from the world and thus as an inefficacious political strategy.[37] Perhaps this is because we see men's world as *the* world, or perhaps it is because, as Janice Raymond says, we see women without men as women alone rather than as women with women, as women withdrawing rather than as women embracing.[38] Raymond argues that if we see women separating as women with women, then we can see that separation, uniting women, fosters solidarity.[39] Uniting is particularly significant in the case of women, who are, as Helen Hacker perceives, unique in being dispersed among their oppressors.[40] Solidarity and unity make effective political action possible.

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31 Hayden & King (1965).

32 This is one of Mary Daly's many neologisms: "Re-membering: 1: Re-calling the Original intuition of integrity; healing the dismembered Self – the Goddess within women; Re-calling the Primordial connections/conversations among women, animals, and Other Elemental beings 2: Realizing the power to See and to Spell out connections among apparently disparate phenomena: Spinning, Creating" Daly (1987, pp. 92–93).

33 Mann (1979) in Daly (1979, p. xxxviii).

34 (*ibid.*, p. xli), quoting Kathy Fire, "Crazy," Folkways Records, 1978.

35 Ahmed (1982, p. 528).

36 *ibid.*, p. 532.

37 Chris Sitka notes in writing about the genesis of women's lands in Australia that some of the women who went on the first "pilgrimage" from Melbourne and Sydney to what would come to be known as "the Mountain" never returned to the lands, perhaps because "retreating to the land was seen as escapist and irresponsible by some" Hall (2016, p. 27).

38 Raymond (2001, pp. 144–145).

39 *ibid.*

40 Hacker (1951, p. 62).

3.ii. Separation as an act of resistance

According to the first argument, separation is *instrumental* to feminist resistance, creating the preconditions for it: a new self-concept, a new culture, a new reality, a raised consciousness, solidarity. But separation is also *intrinsically* feminist resistance.

Card suggests that the act of separation is one of dissent, saying "Separating usually *expresses* dissent."[41] If man defines woman as one who is sexually for a man, then a woman's separation is a rejection of the male definition of woman and of the role of sexual servant into which man has cast her. In another formulation, insofar as "the strength, energy, inspiration, and nurturance of women … keeps men going",[42] – insofar, that is, as man is to woman as parasite to host – a woman's separation is a refusal to "host" the male organism.[43]

Bette Tallen sees separatism as a response to the dominant society's attempt to suppress dissent. She writes:

> Lesbian separatism, like other separatist movements, is a response to systematic oppression and attempts by the dominant culture to annihilate and "disappear" so-called deviant groups. It is the fundamental assertion of this paper that separatism is a reasonable and viable response to the attempt of patriarchy to either assimilate or annihilate or deny the very existence of dissident groups. We do not exist in their eyes except as the product of their projections, fantasies and nightmares, or as we are useful to them. Further, because of the power men have over women their perception takes on the nature of a survival threat.[44]

Lesbians are sexual dissidents; feminists are dissidents from the system of sex socialization. There is pressure against both; and separatism is a way to resist that pressure, and establish existence for *ourselves*.

Sarah Hoagland argues that to separate from a system is to refuse to act in accordance with its rules, and that to so refuse is to undercut these rules. She elaborates, "A king can direct his domain only if most everyone else acknowledges him as king, if the couriers carry his messages. If the couriers dump their messages and go on to something else, not only is the king's communication interrupted, so is his status, for the couriers are no longer focused on him and are therefore declaring themselves no longer couriers."[45] Hoagland identifies the act of working within a system to change it as one of reform and the act of separating from a system as one of revolution.[46] Working within a system, one acts in accordance with and thus necessarily preserves its rules; separating from it, one undercuts its rules and thereby collapses it. Insofar as the system of patriarchal society cannot accommodate women's liberation, feminists must seek to collapse it. They must therefore choose separation over working within.

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41 Card (1990, p. 131), her emphasis.

42 Frye (1983, pp. 98–99).

43 *ibid*.

44 Tallen (1988, p. 133). Lesbian separatism in particular seems to have had a very bad reputation at one point. Liza Cowan wrote in 1978: "The label 'Lesbian Separatist' has become the hot line to everyone's flushing-boy-babies-down-the-toilet fantasy, and they run from it screaming. How did Separatism get such a terrible reputation?" in Hoagland & Penelope (1988, p. 222). She also said "There are Lesbians who will fight, lie, get sick or leave town rather than commit themselves to such a seemingly simple act as claiming a concert is to be for women only" (*ibid*).

45 Hoagland (1988b, p. 55).

46 *ibid.*, p. 63.

Frye goes further, arguing that the act of separation is an assumption of power. She observes that power confers access: a parent has unconditional access to a child's room but a child does not have such access to a parent's. Total power, then, is unconditional access, and total powerlessness unconditional accessibility. When women separate from men, they exclude them, and by excluding them, they seize control of access. They thereby assume power. The act of separation is thus the assumption of power, a power that is not properly theirs, *qua* women. Perhaps this is why Frye describes this act as not only "mean" but "arrogant".[47] Insofar as this power is not properly theirs, *qua* women, their assumption of it is an act of overreaching. Frye's argument is not identical to Raymond's; Raymond suggests that separating, by fostering solidarity, builds women's power, while Frye argues that separating is itself an assumption of power.

This understanding of the act of separation as the seizure of control of access explains, Frye says, why this act appears a negative one, an act of "no-saying",[48] as she puts it. We might wonder why this requires explanation: How could an act of separation be other than negative? When men exclude women, however, they do not appear to be engaging in a negative act. This is because they are not, according to the dominant culture, excluding women from that in which women ought to be included, are not denying women access to that to which women ought to have access. To take an older example, according to the dominant culture at one point in history, man as rational/unemotional required an education, woman as emotional/irrational did not. So women were not by this logic "excluded" from education, rather only apportioned access to education appropriately. There is no denial of access, for there was no legitimate claim to access in the first place. Men are therefore not saying "no". In contrast, when women deny men access, they deny a claim that men, according to the dominant culture, properly have. (This applies to sex-*separated* spaces, not sex-*segregated* spaces, where the former are created by women and the latter are imposed by men, although the latter can be made into the former when women use them in ways that men do not intend).[49]

Frye's argument implies another: as the seizure of control of access, the act of separation is one of redefinition. She says, "When we take control of sexual access to us, of access to our nurturance and to our reproductive function, access to mothering and sistering, we redefine the word 'woman.'"[50] That is, if man defines woman as one who is sexually (and perhaps also reproductively and emotionally) for man, then the act of separation, in particular sexual separation, is an act of redefinition, or, given that man has defined woman, an act of self-definition. Radicalesbians suggest that separating is instrumentally necessary to the creation of a new self-concept. Frye, however, argues that separating is itself the enactment of such a concept. When women separate, they declare themselves *for women*.[51]

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[47] Frye (1983, p. 104).
[48] *ibid*.
[49] Raymond (2001, p. 143).
[50] *ibid.*, p. 107).
[51] A group of Jewish lesbian feminists wrote: "We believe as a political principle that any oppressed group can separate themselves from their oppressors. And as lesbians, we claim that right" (Lesbian Separatist Statement [1982], in Hoagland & Penelope (1988, p. 92).

3.iii. Separation as a refuge

A third argument present in the feminist literature is that separation provides women with a refuge in a patriarchal world. Women-only spaces, spaces that men are forbidden to enter, such as bathrooms, changing rooms, public baths, and women's shelters, are therefore spaces in which women are, however temporarily or otherwise contingently, safe from male violence. In her essay, "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power", Frye notes a comment from Ti-Grace Atkinson, insisting that Frye give more attention to women's vulnerability to assault and degradation, and thus to separation as protection.[52]

As spaces from which men are excluded, women-only spaces are out of reach not only of men's physical touch but also of their objectifying gaze. As such, they are sites not only of protection but also of relief, relief from an intrusive and coercive gaze. In their paper, "Behind Closed Doors: Public Restrooms and the Fight for Equality", Kevin Stuart and Deann Barta Stuart reconstruct the history of sex-separate public bathrooms from primary nineteenth-century documents. Contra the popular view that conservative men imposed sex-separate public bathrooms on women, they argue that women fought for female-only public bathrooms and that they did so in part because they desired a temporary reprieve from the male gaze.[53] McIvers Baths is an ocean pool in the Sydney beach of Coogee which is open to women and children only. In December 1992, a male resident of Coogee lodged a formal legal complaint of "discrimination on the grounds of sex" with the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales. Pool users surveyed during the dispute spoke of McIvers as providing an escape from the male gaze. One woman said, "I breathe a sigh of relief when I pop my 20 cents in that bucket – going into that beautiful, relaxed atmosphere knowing I can sun-bake and have a lovely swim without being hassled or perved at by men, or having my personal space invaded."[54]

Writing in 1981, Bev Jo lamented the fact that women-only events including "parties, dances, concerts, readings, workshops, etc." were "becoming rare", and said: "The reason we needed space away from men and boys has not changed. We need to be with each other, where we can feel safe from harassment and not be influenced by the presence of males."[55] She also extended this to girls:

> Also, boys may be less threatening to women than men, but they are still a threat to girls, and the harassment can be verbal and sometimes physical. Little girls *are* raped and beaten by little boys. Why have so many women forgotten what it feels like to be threatened by boys? Most of us experienced it and girls are still being attacked now.[56]

3.iv. Separation as offering a place to "recharge"

Finally, women-only spaces are sites of "recharging". Audre Lorde writes, "I grew up in largely female environments, and I know how crucial that has been to my own development. I feel the want and need often for the society of women, exclusively. I recognize that our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging."[57]

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[52] Frye (1983), p. 97).
[53] Stuart & Barta Stuart (2019, pp. 28, 35–36).
[54] Iveson (2003, p. 222).
[55] Jo (1981) in Hoagland & Penelope (1988, p. 74).
[56] *ibid.*
[57] Lorde ([1984] 2007, p. 78).

Recharging is facilitated by having common ground, and so not having to expend resources on explaining things.[58]

4. Kinds of Connections to Be Severed

The kinds of connections involved in the reasons for separating just surveyed are physical, mental, and emotional. Not all require separation in physical space: it is possible to be in close proximity to men *and* to have withdrawn e.g. sexual, emotional, ego, and domestic service. But some do. There is no real reprieve, and so no real chance of recharging, in mixed-sex spaces.

5. Criticisms of Separation

Feminist separatism has not been without its critics. There are five main objections worth noting: that separation has been imposed by men on women, and so cannot be liberatory; that it involves a political dissociation from the world; that it keeps women content with the status quo; that it is antithetical to other liberation projects; and that it is hateful. The first two we have mentioned already, so will only revisit briefly.

Separation is imposed by men on women. As Frye says, separation has historically been imposed by men on women in the name of "protecting" women. This does not, however, mean that separation is necessarily oppressive. Rather, it means that if separation is to be liberatory, it must be at women's behest.[59] Raymond creates a conceptual distinction to reflect this difference, terming separation imposed by men on women "sex-segregation" and separation chosen by women "sex-separation".[60] She also observes that sex-segregation can become sex-separation, that men can segregate women but women can use this segregation in ways that men do not intend, in ways that serve their purposes, thereby transforming it into an instance of separation. (Ahmed's discussion of the harem, mentioned earlier, is an example).

Separation is a political dissociation from the world. As Raymond says, separation is "simplistically equated with … an escapist and political dissociation from the world".[61] More simply, separation is a withdrawal from reality. But it is so only from the patriarchal perspective, the perspective from which patriarchy is reality and hence separation from it a withdrawal from reality altogether. From the feminist perspective, separation is a withdrawal from one reality – the patriarchal one – in order to create another – the feminist one. It is not a dissociation from *the* world but a dissociation from one world in order to transform it, from without, into another. As Hoagland says, "Those who dismiss separatist politics as hiding from reality tacitly agree with the patriarchy and help to keep us believing that patriarchy is the only reality."[62]

Separation keeps women content with the status quo. One form that this criticism takes is that separation may provide women with the emotional support that allows them to bear, and thus prevents them from struggling against, patriarchy. As Freedman says, "As loving and supportive as women's networks may have been they could keep women

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58 *ibid*.
59 *ibid.*, p. 97.
60 Raymond (2001, p. 143).
61 *ibid.*, p. 144.
62 Hoagland (1988a, p. 27).

content with a status which was inferior to that of men."[63] This may call into question the use of women-only spaces as sites of recharging. Recharging in order to do what? If the answer is "in order to tolerate men's oppression", then separation is indeed a foil to women's liberation. But if the answer is "in order to continue the struggle for liberation", then it is not. In Australia, many of the women who lived on women's land in New South Wales eventually returned to lives in the cities, but they would have done so with new skills (building, custodianship of land, communal living, gardening, etc.) and with a feminist politics refined by practical experience of managing a "full-immersion" women's collective.[64] A woman who moved to Durham, North Carolina in 1980 in order to live in the lesbian community there later wrote "That period of my life provided me with dreams and politics that have lent a character to everything that followed."[65]

Another slightly different form that this criticism takes is what Scott terms the "safety-valve view".[66] This is the view that separation allows the oppressed to safely express their anger, thereby relieving them of it, the consequence of which is that they will not be driven to resist. As Barrington Moore says, "Even fantasies of liberation and revenge can help to preserve domination through dissipating collective energies in relatively harmless rhetoric and ritual."[67]

Scott rejects the safety-valve view, on the grounds that it falsely assumes that the oppressed find covertly expressing their anger as satisfying as overtly expressing it.[68] He argues that the covert expression of anger ought to be seen instead as a precondition for the overt expression of it, in two ways. First, the covert expression of anger is a rehearsal and thus preparation for the overt expression of it. Second, the covert expression of anger forms the subculture on which overt acts of resistance depend for their meaning.

Separation is antithetical to other liberation projects. One form that this criticism takes is that separation will unify one oppressed group, women, at the expense of dividing others, for example those men and women oppressed in virtue of race. As the Combahee River Collective say,

> Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.[69]

A point about the intersectional nature of experience becomes meaningful here: as one cannot physically separate one's "woman self'" from one's "black self", a separation that is physical requires black women to separate from black men, thus achieving one unity and serving one movement – women's – at the cost of another – black people's. The same

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[63] Freedman (1979, p. 513).
[64] See e.g. the stories gathered in Hall (2016; 2019).
[65] Rudy (2001, p. 192).
[66] Scott (1990, pp. 184-187).
[67] Moore (1978, n. 459), quoted in Scott (1990, p. 185).
[68] Scott (1990, p. 186).
[69] Combahee River Collective ([1977] 1982). In a reply to Combahee from 1981, Isabel Andrews wrote: "We are not advocating fractionalization … we are trying to heal ourselves of the worst effects of this fractionalization" (Worden & Andrews, in Hoagland & Penelope 1988, p. 400). (We have omitted her 20 exclamation points).

goes for other aspects of the self. If women who are oppressed in further respects refuse to separate from the men they share oppression with, then women-only spaces may be utilised only by homogeneous populations of women. This may become self-fulfilling, where the lack of diversity among users of the spaces alienates the women who would make the spaces more diverse.[70]

With the exception of moving to live full-time on women's lands, the separation we've discussed in this paper is confined to certain activities, like consciousness-raising groups or women-only events. Or, it might involve withdrawal from men in very specific domains. For example, sexual separation requires that women refuse to engage in sexual relations with men; emotional separation requires that women withdraw ego and emotional support from men. But this leaves plenty of space for women to engage in other sorts of association with men. So there is no serious issue of achieving women's liberation at the expense of black liberation, or the liberation of other oppressed groups women may belong to. It is highly unlikely that no women oppressed in respects additional to sex would be interested to use, or would value, women-only spaces. For example, women of colour who are fleeing domestic violence are highly likely to value women-only domestic violence shelters.

Separation is hateful. Insofar as separatism is supported by a desire to withdraw from men, it may be considered objectionable in virtue of being hateful. Jeffner Allen concedes that "man-hating is an element of lesbian separatism", but she refuses to concede that this is a genuine *objection* to it. She says "man-hating is not a matter of taste. It depends not upon my personal whim. Man-hating is my response to men's violence against women. According to FBI statistics alone, every three minutes a woman is raped and every eighteen seconds a woman is beaten – by a man. *The ultimate mark of man's possession of women may well be the ethic of suppression by which he forbids women to hate him*."[71] Allen also quotes Joanna Russ's explanation of the way in which the objection to separatism that it is hateful is a kind of gaslighting:

> (1) You do something nasty to me. (2) I hate you. (3) You find it uncomfortable to be hated. (4) You think how nice it would be if I didn't hate you. (5) You decide I ought not to hate you because hate is bad. (6) Good people don't hate. (7) Because I hate I am a bad person. (8) It is not what you did to me that makes me hate you, it is my own bad nature. *I – not you – am the cause of my hating you*.[72]

The separatist response to the accusation that separatism is *hateful* is that men should stop oppressing women, or acting like the enemy of women, or maintaining the fraternal social networks that exclude women (or whatever the preferred analysis of men's responsibility for women's situation is). Then women would have no reason to hate them. It is certainly not that women should find a way to feel more positive about their oppressors.

As will be clear, we do not think that any of these criticisms do real damage to the project of women's separatism.

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[70] For a related discussion of how internal tensions over the conception of "woman" used in cultural feminist (difference feminist) communities caused them to fracture along lines of race, class, and religion, see discussion in Rudy (2001, pp. 200–206).

[71] Hoagland & Penelope (1988, p. 335), our emphasis.

[72] Russ (1973, p. 27; quoted in Allen (1988, p. 334).

6. Conclusion

The gender-critical feminist position on women-only spaces has been that they should include women on the basis of sex, not gender identity. It has been common for opponents, who think such spaces should include on the basis of gender identity, not sex, to characterise gender-critical feminists' arguments as "anti-trans", "transphobic", "exclusionary", "hateful", or similar. But these characterizations are premised on the assumption that the *only* reason for refusing a shift from sex to gender identity in the constituency of women-only spaces could be antagonism toward those males with gender identities who wish to count as part of the constituency.

We hope to have shown that this is not plausible. Feminists have compelling reasons to seek separation from men, whether it is full separation as practised on women's lands, or partial separation, as practised in the range of other spaces that have been made available. Separation is political, and works in the service of women's liberation.

It would take another paper to work carefully through each of the reasons for separating offered above, asking whether exceptions can be tolerated, and if they can, whether they should be. For example, would separation still function as *resistance* if it wasn't on women's own terms, because while they could separate from men *who identify as men*, they were prohibited by equalities law from separating from men *who identify as women*? (For two recent examples of this: a decision by the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner in Tasmania, Australia in 2022 was that lesbians do not have the right to exclude men who identify as women from lesbian dating events; a decision by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2023 was that an anti-discrimination exemption not be granted to lesbians seeking to hold cultural events for 'lesbians born female').[73] Perhaps some of the reasons permit no exceptions while others permit a few; for those that permit a few it would also be important to ask how many exceptions could be tolerated before the interests served by the space would cease to be served, or would at least be put at risk.[74]

Future work might also consider the similarities and differences between sex separatism and other kinds of separatism, such as national (e.g. secession), racial (e.g. Black Power), cultural (e.g. Kohanga Reo),[75] religious (e.g. Orthodox Jews),[76] sexual (e.g. a gay men's choir), economic (e.g. the self-sustaining commune), and more.

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[73] Women's Forum Australia (2022); Australian Human Rights Commission (2023).

[74] Laurene Kelly spoke to Radio National for an episode about Amazon Acres, and said that while she'd been a "raging separatist", she also thought men should have been able to visit women's lands, just not be permitted to actually live on them, or to have any involvement in the decision-making about them. She said "they would have taken over as they do everywhere. They would have caused conflict between women. Men cause conflict between women" (Radio National 2019a).

[75] Maori language kindergarten.

[76] Potts (1988) is particularly interesting for its exploration of *both* Jewish separatism and women's separatism.

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