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Dyketactics!

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Radical activist organization of lesbians of all colors, active in Philadelphia in the 1970s.

Dyketactics! is an anarchist, anti-colonial, anti-racism, and anti-capitalist collective of self-identified dykes of all colors, founded in 1975 in Philadelphia. Today, Dyketactics! is most renowned as the first LGBTQI+ group in the United States to take a city to court for engaging in police brutality specifically against LGBTQI+ peoples. However, Dyketactics! engaged in direct-action struggle on many other issues, too (Bacchetta 2009).

The members of Dyketactics! were black, indigenous, Puerto Rican, racially mixed, Filipina, white, Jewish (both white and of color), and Asian and thereby, for such a small group, somewhat reflective of lesbian populations in the United States. The members ranged in age from nineteen to thirty. The majority of Dyketactics! members were raised in working-class families, but the collective also included a few members from middle-class families. During the most active period of the group between 1975 and 1978, Dyketactics! members lived together collectively in two houses in West Philadelphia. Many of them also worked together at Alexandria Books, a collectively run nonprofit feminist and queer bookstore in central Philadelphia. The housemates and other members had met in LGBTQI+ and other social movements. Most members had come out of prior social movement formations that were not LGBTQI+ specific and remained closely aligned

with them or simultaneously within them: black liberation, socialist, communist or anarchist, Native American, student, Puerto Rican independence, and more. Dyketactics! was part of the most radically critical wing of LGBTQI+ movements and of many other movements against colonialism and capitalism, including Native American and black liberation movements, the movement for Puerto Rican independence, and the workers movements of the day.

Dyketactics! v. the City of Philadelphia

The major Dyketactics! struggle against police brutality began when Dyketactics! members were brutally beaten by police at a queer labor rights demonstration on 4 December 1975. Dyketactics! had been called on by its communities to participate in a LGBTQI+ demonstration during an official meeting of the city council inside City Hall to demand that Bill 1275, a citywide bill that outlawed antigay discrimination, be passed. The bill had been brought up for many years in city council and had been dismissed every time without discussion. With the hope of preventing this from reoccurring, many LGBTQI+ organizations came together to watch over the process. The plan was to sit in the public audience section of the city council meeting room with banners indicating a strong LGBTQI+ presence. The night before the session, Dyketactics! members had created two large banners: "You Will Never Have the Comfort of Our Silence Again!" and "Dykes Ignite." That day, they marched together to City Hall and entered the building and then the council session room, holding the banners.

The council session room was filled with LGBTQI+ activists. It was also heavily attended by journalists. It was "guarded" by Philadelphia's Civil Defense Squad (CDS), a special militarized contingent of "riot police" in Philadelphia that had been created by the then right-wing mayor Frank Rizzo, who was formerly the police chief of Philadelphia. Midway into the meeting, the bill came up. The city council voted once again not to bring it to the floor for discussion. When that decision was announced, demonstrators began chanting "Free Bill 1275," while Dyketactics! members lifted the group's banners. With the first cries, the CDS moved in, targeted Dyketactics! members one by one, and brutally beat them up. Sometimes it took four or five CDS men to control one Dyketactics! member. Dyketactics! members defended themselves but also fought back. The CDS men violently dragged wounded Dyketactics! members outside the session room, down a long hallway, and threw some of them separately into smaller rooms. Eventually most Dyketactics! members, albeit having sustained significant injuries, found their way into the same part of the hallway. Other Dyketactics! members arrived on the scene and raised a giant witch puppet that belonged to the theater

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group Bread and Puppets in which Dyketactics! had allies. Dyketactics! members began screaming shrill curses against lesbophobia, the bill, and the CDS, refusing to be stopped by the CDS violence. Soon the CDS members reassembled, formed a circle, moved in on the Dyketactics! members, beat them again, and then dragged them down Philadelphia City Hall's four flights of stone steps. At that point, the most injured Dyketactics! members were rushed to the hospital.

Within one week, six of the Dyketactics! members who had been most severely beaten filed a lawsuit against the City of Philadelphia for lesbophobic police brutality. They wrote a press release to explain what had happened and why they were bringing charges. This was the first case ever in the history of the United States of LGBTQI+ people taking a city to court for police brutality specifically against queers. The Dyketactics! six plaintiffs were Paola Bacchetta, Sherrie Joyce Cohen, Kathy Hogan, Linda Norwood, Sharon Owens, and Barbara Lipschutz (later Barbara Ruth). The trial for the case known as *Dyketactics et al. v. Fencl et al. (Dyketactics! v. the City of Philadelphia)* took place in the fall of 1976. It received much press and television coverage. The trial became a spectacle of lesbophobia, as the CDS's lawyers worked to discredit every Dyketactics! member and to construct the CDS members as heroes. But the trial was also a spectacle of dyke resistance. The "Dyketactics! Six" and other Dyketactics! members arrived together in court each day chanting and singing songs of resistance. They sat together in solidarity in the courtroom. When it became clear that there was no chance to win the trial (and the lawsuit did end up failing), the Dyketactics! Six began to use the trial's publicity to do political work for the LGBTQI+ community and communities of color. For instance, in their testimony, as well as in interviews, they included statistics about crimes against LGBTQI+ people and about police brutality against people of color. These points ended up in the media, reaching a large audience.

During and following the trial, as a result of the extensive publicity in the media, members were marked, followed, and persecuted by a whole range of parties. Many were harassed in the streets, on public transportation, and elsewhere in public spaces. Some were framed on false charges and in some cases incarcerated. One, Bacchetta, was pursued on false charges for supporting Assata Shakur, a black liberation movement political prisoner, and eventually ended up forced into political exile in France.

Other Actions

Dyketactics!'s political actions are too numerous to list here (for more information, see Ruth 2009; Bacchetta 2009). Across their many actions, Dyketactics! centrally

denounced Native American genocide and the ongoing conditions of native peoples; antiblack racism and racist violence, deprivation of queer labor rights, violence against women, the racial politics of sterilization, inaccessibility of abortion and contraception, class inequalities, the capitalist and racist destruction of the environment and all living beings, and racism within the women's and LGBTQI+ movements. Some examples of Dyketactics! actions include a series of direct-action protests at the 1976 Bicentennial held in Philadelphia, including radical dyke theater and a demonstration to denounce the Bicentennial as a colonial, racist, and misogynistic event; a Philadelphia citywide women workers general strike; solidarity work on behalf of the anti-Vietnam War political prisoner Susan Saxe and Shakur; the liberation and rehousing (back with their mothers) of children of lesbians awarded by the lesbophobic, heteropatriarchal state to fathers; a protest to support a lesbian high school student who was harassed at school; high-profile protests against snuff films in which women actors were abused and killed; support for the struggles of sex workers, including those mobilized by the well-known sex-worker activist Margo St. James; and the organization of an entire neighborhood by Dyketactics! members living in the collective Samson Street (West Philadelphia) to protest horrific housing conditions perpetuated by their common slum landlord.

Dyketactics! also worked creatively to construct dyke music, poetry, theater, and dyke spaces. Some members were part of the Philadelphia theater group Rites of Women. Most members did street theater together as part of Dyketactics! political actions. Indeed, in an early press release, Dyketactics! affirms that the collective was seeking to "ignite the imagination" of the LGBTQI+ community (Ruth 2009). The group's writings were published in Philadelphia's *Hera* and other lesbian and feminist newspapers of the day, including *Lesbian Connection*, *Majority Report*, and *Off Our Backs*.

Political Significance

Dyketactics! was a path breaker in several areas. Historically, the 1975–1976 Dyketactics! trial marks the first time ever that LGBTQI+ people took the city to court for police brutality specifically against queers. Dyketactics! was against prisons, and therefore did not demand prison sentences for the accused police officers. Instead the group demanded that the city recognize police brutality against lesbians and other queers, and provide financial compensation that Dyketactics! would donate to struggles of the group's choice.

Beyond the trial, another leading aspect of Dyketactics! was its development of a specifically lesbian- and queer-situated critical analysis of settler colonialism,

genocide, slavery, racism, and capitalist exploitation. The group incarnated a heterogeneity of racialized, class, and gendered positionalities and worked toward the inseparability of LGBTQI+ liberation with all the liberation movements of the day. For Dyketactics!, every liberation issue was always already a lesbian and queer issue, and every lesbian and queer issue required an analysis in which colonialism, racism, and capitalism were central factors.

Locally, in Philadelphia, Dyketactics! drew links between relations of power, subaltern conditions and subjects, and the brutalities of police repression. The Dyketactics! trial became a coalitional site that brought together in the same space some of the most radical Philadelphia lesbian and queer activists of the day, including Tommi Avicolti Mecca (Radical Faeries and the Gay Liberation Front) and Cei Bell (black trans struggles).

Afterlife

After 1978, under the pressure of repression, Dyketactics! members were forced to disperse, and the group could no longer meet regularly. Many Dyketactics! members remain political activists and *artists*, in Philadelphia, elsewhere in the United States, and internationally. For example, one Dyketactics! Six member, Owens, a legal assistant and longtime black movement activist, worked on the defense team of surviving members of the black liberation and anti-police brutality group MOVE, after MOVE's group home was bombed from the air in 1985 by the Philadelphia mayor's office, killing eleven members including five children. Hogan became a lawyer; she gathered and digitized the constitutions of all native nations in the United States and made them collectively available on the internet so that the nations could learn from each other how to strengthen their individual constitutions to better protect their sovereignty. She also engaged in a large amount of pro bono legal work for people in poverty. Barbara Ruth, a widely published poet, became a leader in the queer disability movement. Cohen, also a lawyer, walked on the Longest Walk organized by

the American Indian Movement, remained active in LGBTQI+ organizing, worked closely with black liberation movements and workers' unions, and twice ran for the Philadelphia city council. Bacchetta, a sociologist and professor in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, published widely on social movements. She continued as an activist in decolonial queer of color and anti-racism movements in the United States and France.

Beyond the Dyketactics! Six, another member, Monica A. Hand (1952–2016), an accomplished poet and activist, was part of Cave Canem and Black Lives Matter. She was the author of *me and Nina* (2012) and *The DiVida Poems* (2018). Julie Blackwomom is a widely published poet and fiction writer. Some of her short stories appeared in her book *Voyage Out 2* (1990). She also continued to work with prisoners. Chea Villanueva became a fiction writer, publishing *Jessie's Song, and Other Stories* (1995) and the novel *Bulletproof Butches* (1997). Pauline Miriam became founder and owner of Hot Flash, a company that organizes massive parties for lesbians in major cities, thereby building broad community. Many Dyketactics! members continue to communicate almost daily thanks to a (private) Dyketactics! Facebook group. The collective also holds in-person group reunions in Philadelphia every few years.

SEE ALSO *Combahee River Collective; Daughters of Bilitis; Lavender Menace*

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