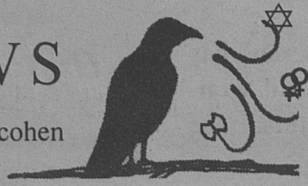


feature

CROW'S CAWS

by crow cohen



Betty, Back Off!

I'm pissed at Betty Friedan. This is nothing new.

In the late '70s, she was asked to be keynote speaker for one of Burlington's first feminist conferences, "Women, Women, Women." Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in the early '60s—a book that helped launch the second wave of feminism. She exposed the shocking news that many of the privileged suburban housewives she interviewed were profoundly dissatisfied with their roles as devoted stay-at-home wives and mothers, despite the latest household gadgets and shiny linoleum floors that were supposed to make them ecstatic.

I was asked to be on the planning committee for the conference. The organizers were attempting to do outreach to the radical lesbian feminist community, their poor but feisty sisters. I was the token radical lesbian.

I remember advocating for childcare and a sliding scale, but I also attempted to have Betty Friedan blocked as the main speaker. At that time, she was publicly trashing radical lesbians who were challenging her mainstream, as opposed to revolutionary, politics. The lesbian community demanded she submit a written apology for her outrageously homophobic remarks before she was confirmed as the speaker. She apologized; she spoke; and as I recall, she basically managed not to be offensive, although she wasn't particularly inspiring. (Sweet Honey in the Rock, on the other hand, tore the roof off South Burlington High School.)

Here it is, 25 years later, and I eagerly pulled Friedan's recent autobiography *My Life So Far* off the shelves of Fletcher Free Library. I love reminiscences of the women's movement, since that era totally changed my life.

The first chapters drew me in. After all, Friedan was writing for magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* in the '50s when she decided to publicize long-suppressed feelings that women were treated as second-class citizens in our male-run world. Needless to say, her views threatened the postwar culture of returning GIs. They just wanted to go back to their jobs and resume running the country (which women had done while they

were gone). After the trauma of war, they simply wanted to settle down with their sweet wives and 2.5 children, safely ensconced behind the white picket fence, and watch *I Remember Mama* on TV every Friday night.

I was fascinated by Friedan's *chutzpah*. Her book sold millions of copies worldwide and was translated into several languages, no thanks to her original publishers, who refused to print the copies obviously being requested. News of this book spread by word of mouth as (mostly middle-class) women hungrily found validation for the pain that had no name: the malaise of a generation of women who felt empty and useless because they'd bought into the male view that women were not supposed to think too hard, become political activists, or clamor for equality. Betty frankly admits her husband was beating her as she was lecturing across the country on the subject of male domination.

But Betty had her blind spots. She hated radical dykes. She was furious when lesbianism moved out of the realm of "sexual preference" into the arena of radical feminism. She hated the concept of "sexual politics"—the notion that sexual behavior just may be drastically influenced by heterosexist hegemony. In other words, our so-called "sexual preference" is often dictated by straight male oppressors (conscious and otherwise) who are invested in keeping women under their domain so they can control the institutions of marriage, property, you name it.

Betty says, "I was...beside myself at the damage being done to the women's movement by extremists and the 'radical chic.' Sexual politics was...overshadowing the mainstream issues of abortion and child care...and fomenting an image of the women's movement as just a bunch of lesbians." (p. 248) She thought the militancy of us pushy dykes was not just about anger at being shunned by our straight sisters when homophobic slurs were flung at us by anti-feminists, but that we were part of a government plot to divide the movement.

"The question was, who was provoking the disruptions and pushing the lesbian agenda? ...The shock tactics of the rad-

ical fringe made me suspect outside agents," she wrote. "The attempt to equate feminism and the women's movement with lesbianism had always been a favorite device of those who wanted to frighten women away from it. What better way to divide and weaken the women's movement than to infiltrate and immobilize it politically? It may seem paranoid to have suspected agents provocateurs being planted within the movement. But it turned out that it wasn't." (p. 223)

Betty, dear, asking you to apologize for dismissing us as a bunch of distasteful, rabble-rousing, divisive no-accounts before we paid you hundreds of dollars to speak to us was not prompted by the FBI.

Betty presumed that women who attended feminist conferences were not interested in exploring how empowered a woman could be if she turned her back on the male gaze in

the most thorough way possible—by becoming a lesbian. "I did not take kindly to the extremists who tried to take over the stage and insist on talking about lesbians," she wrote. "I didn't want to discuss lesbianism. And neither did the audience. The audience had come to hear about the issues and changes facing all women." (p. 221)

Apparently Betty never considered that "changes facing all women" might include redirecting their "sexual preferences" toward females, who are often taught from the moment of birth to nurture, to value feelings, to cooperate. There is no question that Betty Friedan made huge contributions to the movement, and I respect her for that; but in this book, for me, she comes across as petulant and resentful instead of a power of example.

I'm not saying women who

are devoted to men can't be radical feminists. That's much too simplistic. I'm just suggesting that considering lesbianism more than sexual preference is one form of radical feminism.

I have to agree with Sonia Johnson, who also believed pushing the lesbian agenda was more than just urging women to have sex with each other. In *Going Out of Our Minds*, Sonia says, "Finding women sexually attractive has nothing to do with feminism; most men find women sexually attractive. But deeply admiring and appreciating women, dedicating oneself to their welfare, giving them and their values, their ways of being in the world, one's full, first, and total loyalty no matter what, this is the basis of feminism."

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