1 Introduction

In this Element, we examine the manifestos of a gender-based separatism movement and network, respectively. We analyse texts by lesbian separatists and Men Going Their Own Way (hereafter referred to as MGTOW) in order to establish the similarities and differences between them. Lesbian separatism is a mostly historical movement in which women distanced themselves from both men and from women who pursued relationships with men. In some cases, this involved purchasing land and developing residential collectives; alternatively, lesbians formed collectively run businesses. MGTOW is a part of the broad online anti-feminist network known as the manosphere, in which mostly heterosexual men advocate abstaining from relationships with women to varying degrees (e.g., avoiding marriage or sexual relationships). Comparing the discourses of these two gender-based separatist groups shows how they influence contemporary gender relations; more specifically, the study helps throw light on how language use can sustain the toxic masculinity of the manosphere. Moreover, our research also traces the roots of the current debate around (trans) women's rights.

Gender-based separatism must be analytically distinguished from gender segregation (or 'sex segregation', as most authors call it). Cohen (2011) defines such segregation as 'laws, rules, or policies that require complete separation of men and women or that completely exclude either men or women from participating in an activity' (pp. 57–8). Conversely, Frye (1978) explains that female separatism comprises separation 'from men and from institutions, relationships, roles, and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males' and is crucially 'initiated or maintained, at will, *by women*' (p. 31, original emphasis). Thus, while segregation is imposed in a top-down manner by way of laws and policies, separatism is practised from below. For example, segregation includes male- or female-only schools, prisons, military units, workplaces and public toilets (Reskin, 1993; Cohen, 2011), whereas separatism encompasses practices such as avoiding heterosexual relationships, refusing to consume sexist media or forbidding people of the perceived 'opposite' sex to enter one's home (Frye, 1978). Separatism is usually a liberationist movement in which people who are disempowered on the grounds of, for example, gender, ethnicity, religion or nationality seek to gain power by withdrawing from dominant groups in their respective societies. It is therefore no surprise that we find few examples of male separatism. Indeed, MGTOW's aim to have no or only limited relations with women is based on their belief that men are oppressed in contemporary Western society.

Separatism is perhaps better known in the context of national and regional conflicts, such as the tensions about the Tamil secessionist movement (Sri Lanka), the wish for independence in Catalonia (Spain) and Scotland (United Kingdom) or the historical conflict over the Republic of Biafra (Nigeria). Understood as an expression of regional or national identity, separatism 'aims to reduce the political and other powers of the central government of a state over a particular territory and to transfer those powers to the population . . . of the territory in question' (Pavković & Cabestan, 2013, p. 1). The conflicts that both trigger and are caused by national and regional separatism mean that the word 'separatism' can itself become a contested signifier: while it is often imbued with negative connotations by political majorities, such evaluations are questioned and subverted by those wishing to form a new state by breaking away from a larger state (Karpenko-Seccombe, 2021). It is the positive view of separatism that Jill Johnston drew on in her book *Lesbian Nation*, in which she metaphorically extended the idea of national to gender-based separatism (see Koller, 2010), declaring that 'an oppressed group must withdraw into itself to establish its own identity and rebuild its strength through mutual support and recognition' (1973, pp. 166–7). Despite Johnston's claim that 'unless all women are lesbians, there will be no true political revolution' (1973, p. 166), however, not all gender-based separatism revolves around homosexuality. The mostly heterosexual MGTOW's search for sovereignty is a case in point, as are instances of workplace separatism. As a term introduced by Brewer (1995), workplace separatism refers to usually women withdrawing from mixed organisational settings and instead forming their own, single-sex businesses or organisations. Examples range from networks for female entrepreneurs to women's collectives in developing countries (e.g., Kamra & Sen, 2021).

Comparing the two forms of gender-based separatism that we investigate in this Element, MGTOW has been described by one commentator on the manosphere as 'a lot like lesbian separatism, but for straight dudes' (Futrelle, n.d.), which anticipates similarities but also differences between the two separatist communities. It is notable that members of both communities share(d) their experiences with other members and encourage(d) each others' beliefs to develop. For lesbian separatists, this practice took the form of feminist consciousness-raising groups, whereas for MGTOW, the process of realising perceived truths about society and gender relations is called 'taking the red pill'. However, it is important to acknowledge that the two communities reflect different phenomena. Lesbian separatism was tied to, although not identical with, radical feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, which sought to end power imbalances between men and women, whereas MGTOW is part of a wider backlash against the gains that women have made as a result of feminism. Thus,

we do not seek to claim that the two movements are equivalent in their stance or in their degree of radicalism. Rather, our aim in this Element is to investigate in an empirical manner whether Futrelle's assertion that the two share similarities is true. We do this by examining the language used in manifestos by both lesbian separatists and MGTOW.

Having introduced the topic of gender-based separatism, the rest of the Element is structured as follows. In Section 2, we describe lesbian separatists and MGTOW in more detail, paying particular attention to their historical backgrounds. In Section 3, we discuss the extent to which lesbian separatism and MGTOW can be classified as social movements, and we introduce literature on what constitutes a manifesto. Following this, Section 4 introduces the manifestos that make up our data set and explains the methods we use to investigate these manifestos, namely inductive, data-led qualitative discourse analysis and deductive, theory-led argumentation analysis. In Sections 5 and 6, we showcase our findings from the lesbian separatist and MGTOW texts, respectively, and in Section 7, we note the similarities and differences between the manifestos and consider the extent to which these discourses can be considered extremist. We then conclude in Section 8 by summarising the contributions of our study and by noting interesting directions for future research on both lesbian separatists and MGTOW.

2 Forms of Gender-Based Separatism

In this section, we provide some background to lesbian separatism and MGTOW as a gender-based separatist movement and network, respectively, in order to contextualise our data and help to later explain the findings from our analysis (Sections 5 and 6).

2.1 Lesbian Separatism

Female separatism is practised to a degree whenever women create spaces which are exclusive to themselves in order to further political or economic causes. In the highly politicised lesbian discourse of the 1970s, separatism was seen by many as the logical extension of feminism. Considering the patriarchal conditions women were subjected to, it seemed logical to the advocates of separatism that all women would have to be lesbians and all lesbians separatists (Lettice, 1987, p. 109). Women who maintained relations of any kind with men were seen by separatists as unable to dissociate themselves from a society structured in sexist and heteronormative terms. The final goal was to overthrow patriarchy and the way by which this goal would be achieved was through a total withdrawal of female energy from men. Based on the notion of 'parasitism of

males on females' (Frye, 1978, p. 33), the dominant male system was thought to collapse when it was denied the 'mental, spiritual, and physical' female energy it exploits (MacDonald, 2015). Any form of co-operation with men, even for liberationist politics such as gay rights or anti-racism, therefore runs counter to the idea of separatism. Indeed, many Black feminists took a stance against gender-based separatism and instead opted to work with Black men in the civil rights movement, while also seeking to educate them about feminist issues (see Combahee River Collective, 1977). For lesbian separatists, however, even debating issues of oppression and liberation with out-group members is thought to be counterproductive, because ' [w]hen we engage in a system . . . we contribute by consensus to its underlying structure even when also challenging it' (Hoagland, 1987, p. 25).

Retrospective accounts of lesbian separatism have emphasised that the movement was important as a revolutionary vanguard and helped women build a community, but was not intended as 'a realistic, indeterminately future' vision of the world (Johnston, 2006). Others stress that separatism 'is not an ideology, but rather a feminist process, a method for living in the world' and an inspiring utopia (Enszer, 2014, p. 1). According to its advocates, separatism makes it possible for women to develop a community with a 'shared language [and] the opportunity for self-love' (MacDonald, 2015). It is helpful to think of separatism as a continuum, with women realising a greater or lesser degree of living without men. Indeed, many lesbians found their social, sexual and working lives to revolve around women, not necessarily as a conscious choice but as a logical result of their interests and attraction. These women did not necessarily identify as separatists:

> I think that separatism was regarded as something positive by many, many women in the late 1970s. By older as well as by younger women. That was certainly seen as something which enabled women to experience themselves completely independent of everything. . . . Among my friends there were a lot who had very separatist tendencies. (interview with Ina Feder, quoted in Koller, 2008, p. 117)

Like any radical movement, lesbian separatists may not have constituted a large proportion of feminists, perhaps not even lesbian feminists. However, it is important to remember that their uncompromising politics and prolific publishing meant 'pushing the boundaries' for others (Larman, 2019), by making more radical demands and thereby inspiring non-separatists to broaden their agenda.

Although lesbian separatism is based on the idea of withdrawal from, and exclusion of, men, the movement was to go further and create a veritable counter-reality, re-defining such broad concepts as 'ethics, language, sexuality,

culture' (Geraldine, 1988, p. 5), along with new forms of spirituality. There were economic aspects, too, as separatists set up businesses, events and networks to distribute publications and music (Gush, 2015). That counter-society was meant to entail a counter-discourse empowering the women who participated in it. To reach that goal, every manifestation of patriarchal discourse – including not only linguistic artefacts but also music, paintings and so on – was to be removed from the life of a lesbian separatist. This seclusion led to self-reliance and the emergence of women's housing and work co-operatives in the 1970s and 1980s. While women in urban areas formed task-oriented collectives (e.g., in publishing), and some separatists collectives lived as travellers on the road (Levy, 2009), residential separatist communities were often geographically located in the countryside, especially in the United States, as contact with men could be more easily avoided there (Shugar, 1995, p. 57; Archibald, 2021). Additionally, 'women's land' seemed to promise a closer relation with nature, which was perceived as the paradigmatic female raped by male power and technology and therefore became an important topic in separatist discourse. This focus on nature as female indicates the links between lesbian separatism and cultural feminism, both of which were prone to essentialism and biological definitions of females (Mackay, 2021, pp. 57–9). However, the hard physical work involved, along with a lack of skills and experience of previously urban separatists, meant that most separatist country communities lasted less than ten years. As one woman remembers it:

> We didn't have country living skills or communal living skills and we didn't have good ways to solve conflicts. . . . I also learned that separatism was a very defensive position. It didn't change the power of women. (Moore, 2020)

Although the women's land movement has been described as 'a once thriving community, now in steady decline' (Savage, 2019), for a certain period of time, land-based, travelling or urban separatism was the ideal for many lesbian feminists.

At their heyday in the 1970s and early 1980s, separatists lived in all-women communities as much as possible to gain complete independence from men. The latter decade, however, saw a number of wide-reaching socio-political changes. In the United States and the UK, the Reagan and Thatcher governments, respectively, ushered in an economic climate that was characterised by lower taxes and less public funding, privatisation and a focus on individual wealth creation through investment. These changes had profound effects on a lesbian community that had, for the better part, not only espoused a collectivist ethos, but also crucially relied on public funding for projects and space. The general paradigm shift away from collectivism and towards individualism that

began in the 1980s led to a relative decentring of the lesbian separatist community and had many women redirect their focus (Stein, 1997, p. 131). Under the impression of the individualist ideology of the day, it must have seemed tempting to replace the downwardly mobile life in the lesbian feminist 'subsistence community' (Wolf, 1979, p. 101) with the prospect of a more comfortable existence, even if that ultimately came at the cost of less solidarity. Cox (1993, p. 63) describes such effects of hegemony in a very vivid simile: 'Hegemony is like a pillow: it absorbs blows and sooner or later the would-be assailant will find it comfortable to rest upon.'

On a material level, withdrawing into the private sphere was, in Britain, facilitated by Thatcher's policy of promoting private home ownership and enabling women to buy property in their own name without a male guarantor. As a consequence, in 1980s Britain, local friendship communities evolved around refurbishing newly bought houses. While housing as a social practice is a crucial element in building any community, its significance for lesbian communities changed dramatically, from enabling collective living to an expression of wealth, individualism and coupledom. In addition, the AIDS crisis that started in the 1980s led to renewed collaboration with gay men, and many separatists who were active in the environmentalist and peace movement saw some of their causes evaporate with the changing face of world politics towards the end of the decade. For instance, Healey (1996, p. 78) outlines how the feminist protests at UK cruise missile base Greenham Common, which had begun in 1983, gave rise to separatist camps that dissolved when the missiles were destroyed at the end of the Cold War in 1989.

Other pressures on the separatist movement were internally generated. Oppressive behaviour, explained in Marxist terms as 'false consciousness' by separatist theory, reared its ugly head in the form of racism and class bias (Shugar, 1995, pp. 94–9). Indeed, it was often middle-class women who chose to live as separatists and most of them were white. Their choice of separatism was in part motivated by being disillusioned with both the gay liberation and the wider feminist movement, which they perceived as ignoring lesbians at best and being hostile towards them at worst. Black women, however, also had allegiances with the civil rights and Black Power movements and despite issues of sexism there,

> many . . . feminists of color in the second wave didn't see an intrinsic value in separating from the mixed-gender communities that had raised and empowered them in a world run and dominated by white people in order to throw in their lot with white feminists who didn't prioritize or understand their needs. (Carmen, 2015)

On a theoretical level, Black writers such as bell hooks rejected the idea of sexism as the root cause of all oppression, instead maintaining that oppression stems from Western thinking and its 'belief that the superior should control the inferior' (hooks, 2005, p. 234). That racist discrimination should exist in their community was a cruel realisation for separatists, many of whom 'felt they were free of the behaviours that oppressed them' (Shugar, 1995, p. 95). Splits were also brought about by the exclusion of bisexual and trans women, and by the question whether boy children should be allowed in separatist communities, a debate which hurt and estranged many women (Stein, 1997, p. 119).

In the face of such external pressures and internal tensions, the separatist movement saw itself as cornered and, by many accounts, gradually began to turn its energy and aggression inwards. In some part, such a development was afforded by the very beliefs that form the foundation of separatism. Separatism in its ideal form was meant to be woman-centred, prioritising women's needs and concerns. This woman-centred approach had one major drawback, however, in that it saw the way women lived their lives as the 'subject of revolution' (Star, 1982, p. 67), thus shifting the onus of effecting social change onto women. Later accounts of that inward redirection differ; while some emphasise that 'lesbian separatism was never a prescriptive code for behaviour or relationships [but] a way to figure out what it meant to be a woman' (Gush, 2015), others felt that separatism had 'stopped being a crazy, wonderful experiment' and had become 'a dogma' (Doyle, 1996, p. 185).

It seems safe to claim that as a social movement, lesbian separatism is now defunct. That is not to say, however, that separatist beliefs and ideals have ceased to exist. Indeed, while there is a perception that 'lesbian separatism is a maligned social and cultural formation inside and outside of feminism' (Enszer, 2014, p. 1), it has also enjoyed some re-evaluation, and seminal texts continue to be referenced. For example, the opening of the Radicalesbians' 1970 manifesto *The Woman Identified Woman* – 'A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion'– is quoted in a podcast half a century later (Unter & Kelly, 2020), where the metaphor is also extended to 'th[e]n I am a black hole' and the transcript comes with the animated image of an erupting volcano.[1]

Some contemporary writers see current women's spaces as 'places where diversity and difference are embraced, not feared', where intersectionality can be acknowledged and where identities can be positively reinforced (Carmen, 2015). Perhaps the most pressing question for separatism today is one that has sparked an often polarised debate in wider society, namely how to define who is

[1] For an analysis of the Radicalesbians' manifesto, see Koller (2008, pp. 48–58).

a woman in the first place. Some, especially older, separatists do not accept trans women as women, arguing that trans women pose a threat to women's spaces (Jo et al., 2015) or claiming that 'transactivism erases lesbians' (Get the L out, n.d.). The latter proposition refers to both trans women being seen as threatening women's spaces and trans men being perceived as lesbians who cannot accept their sexuality. In sharp contrast, others believe that separatism can be extended to 'fight the binary altogether', seeing that 'woman and man don't really feel like fixed terms' anymore (Unter & Kelly, 2020). We will return to these divergent positions in Section 8.

Yet perhaps the most significant change is that access to lesbian separatist discourse is no longer restricted to women. Before the advent of the internet, separatist texts were not only produced by women, but were exclusively distributed to, and read by, women as well. As one account states, '[w]e sold only by subscription, or in women's bookstores. Sometimes we sold the magazine in person as we toured the country' (Gush, 2015). These days, separatists and their writings, and discussions on the topic, can be found online, where anyone can access them. This would have been anathema to the core notion of separatism in previous decades but of course helps to build networks now. We will return to the ethical aspects of restricted texts in Section 4; for now, we will move on to provide an overview of the digitally born network of MGTOW.

2.2 Men Going Their Own Way

The men's rights movement has its roots in the men's liberation movement, itself an offshoot of second-wave feminism. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, some men began to engage with feminist activism and so-called 'men's liberation' groups believed men should collaborate with their female counterparts in order to bring about positive social change which would benefit both men and women (Messner, 1998; Coston & Kimmel, 2013). Men's liberationists founded organisations such as the National Organisation for Men Against Sexism and formed their own parallel critiques of the 'male sex role', such as expectations of men to provide for their family as the sole breadwinner (Messner, 1998; Coston & Kimmel, 2013). According to Messner (1998), such analysis allowed men's liberationists to attract men to feminism by emphasising how they too could benefit from an end to patriarchy. However, this also led to 'strains and tensions' (p. 256) as many men found it difficult to reconcile men's supposed power and privilege with the negative aspects of the male sex role, such as higher male suicide rates, and the role of men as families' main earners. Sex role theory could be used to argue that men were equally oppressed by sexism as women, if not more so.

By the 1970s, a cleavage was beginning to form with the emergence of an anti-feminist men's rights movement. In contrast to pro-feminist men's liberationists, men's rights activists either 'downplayed or angrily disputed' feminist claims that a patriarchal social order oppressed women and privileged men (Messner, 1998, p. 256). Feminism was argued to be a 'hateful ideology' and women's empowerment was seen as the true source of men's misery (Coston & Kimmel, 2013, p. 372). Typical evidence of male oppression included factors such as: male-only military drafts; lower rates of paternal custody arrangements but higher rates of child support and alimony payments; higher rates of male homelessness, suicide and workplace deaths; lack of support for male victims of sexual and domestic violence; and fraudulent accusations of rape and domestic violence (Messner, 1998; Fox, 2004; Coston & Kimmel, 2013). Many of these arguments are reproduced within contemporary men's rights discourse (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). Towards the end of the decade, men's rights activists founded their own organisations such as Men's Rights Inc. and National Coalition of Free Men (Messner, 1998). Like feminists and men's liberationists, men's rights activists published positional literature, with key texts (Clatterbaugh, 2000) including *The Masculine Mystique* (Kimbrell, 1997)[2] and *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men are the Disposable Sex* (Farrell, 1993). The latter is particularly noteworthy, given that Warren Farrell had previously identified as a men's liberationist and been hailed as 'the most public male feminist in the USA' (Messner, 1998, p. 262). His career trajectory exemplifies shifts from a discourse of men's liberation to a discourse of men's rights.

Another consequence of the schism was the foundation of a 'mythopoetic' movement, which sought to enable men to search for some 'deep' or 'essential' masculinity thought to have been lost in modern societies (Coston & Kimmel, 2013, p. 371). Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book about Men* (1990), a key text of the movement (Clatterbaugh, 2000), describes the supposed prevalence of 'soft males' who lacked male role models and consequently had not been properly socialised into masculinity. To solve this perceived problem and help men reclaim their masculinity, mythopoetic leaders organised male-only events such as wilderness retreats, stadium rallies and group therapies (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994). Just as men's liberationists claimed men could benefit from feminist activism, mythopoets claimed that (heterosexual) women stood to benefit from the mythopoetic movement, as by attending their events men could become more nurturing and emotionally responsive partners (Coston & Kimmel, 2013, p. 371).

[2] The title of Kimbrell's (1997) book alludes to Betty Friedan's early feminist text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

In contrast to the men's rights movement, the relationship between the mythopoetic movement and feminism was ambivalent. Although feminists and anti-feminists alike praised the movement for encouraging men to open up emotionally, there was also criticism. Some anti-feminists accused mythopoets of promoting femininity rather than masculinity (Fox, 2004), while feminist critiques concerned the movement's gender essentialism and appropriation of Indigenous mythologies and spiritual practices at their rallies (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994). Fox (2004) also finds that mythopoets were largely unaware of both pro-feminist and anti-feminist men's movements. Instead, mythopoets described themselves as 'largely gender separatists, neither pro-feminist nor anti-feminist' (Kimmel, 2013, pp. 105–6) rather than espousing a more explicitly hostile backlash to feminism.

However, the mythopoetic movement had declined in popularity by the late 1990s (Clatterbaugh, 2000; Fox, 2004). Clatterbaugh (2000) attributes this decline to lack of a long-term strategy and repetitiveness of their writings and gatherings: if a man had attended one mythopoetic rally, there was little need to attend a second. Nevertheless, it did not disappear entirely; for example, the ManKind Project was founded in 1984 and continues to organise 'male initiation' retreats following the ethos of the mythopoetic movement. Moreover, while the mythopoetic movement may have declined, men's rights movements have continued to proliferate with the growth of social media, paralleling shifts towards digitally mediated activism within feminism (Munro, 2013). Between the late 2000s and mid-2010s, a new network of anti-feminist websites and social media accounts started to take shape (Hermansson et al., 2020). Previously established organisations such as the National Coalition for Men created websites and new men's rights organisations were formed, offline and online such as A Voice For Men and Return of Kings (see Kelly, 2020, for an analysis of these sites). As well as their own websites, men's rights groups established a presence on mainstream platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

This network of men's rights blogs, websites and social media is often collectively referred to as the 'manosphere'. Reddit has been singled out as an especially prominent site of activity (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020), which hosts manosphere subreddits such as r/MGTOW and r/TheRedPill (Krendel, 2020). An intertextual reference to the film *The Matrix* (1999), taking the red pill is a metaphor for becoming aware of 'life's ugly truths' such as 'feminism's misandry and brainwashing' (Ging, 2019, p. 640). Conversely, a person who is 'blue-pilled' is thought to live in ignorance and delusion. While this sort of language is common throughout the manosphere, the network is not ideologically or linguistically homogeneous (McGlashan & Krendel, forthcoming 2023). Researchers typically distinguish at least four major groups: men's rights