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Queering Home and Family in the 1980s: The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp

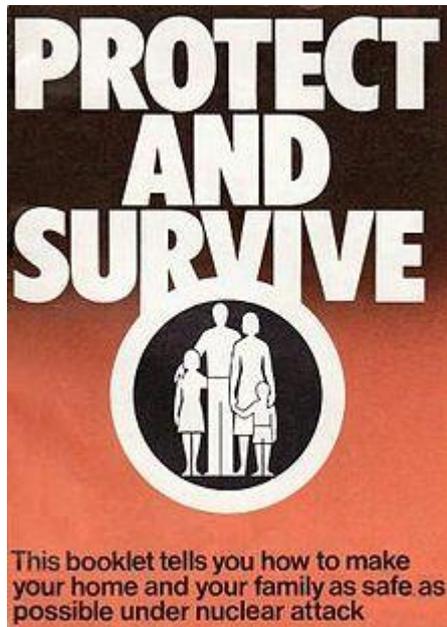
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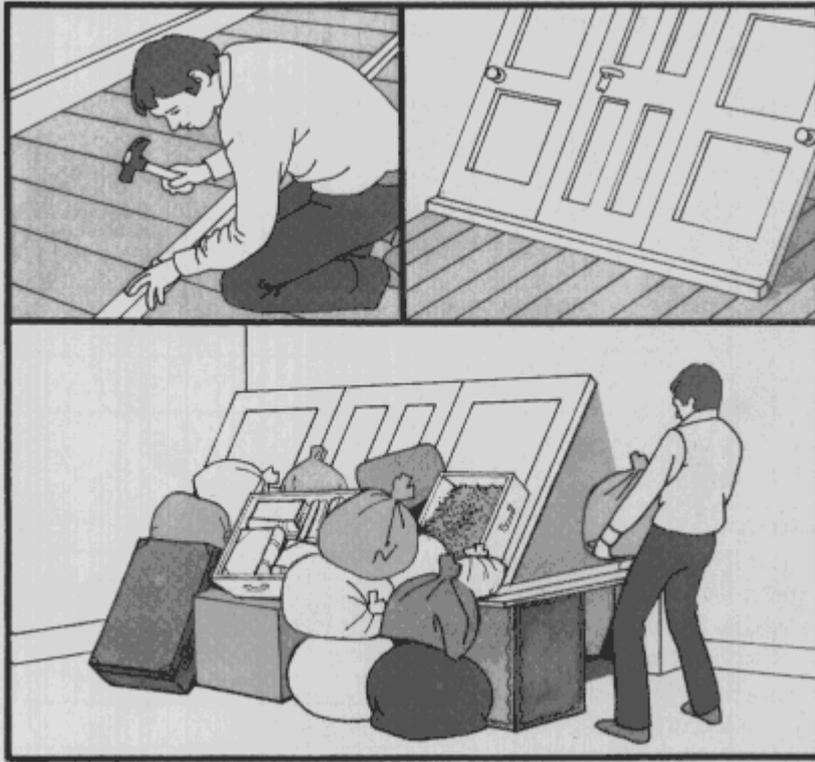
I want to continue with the theme of creating a history of queer homes and queer families by taking us back thirty years, to the early 1980s. In the telling of stories of our queer pasts and the theorising of queer politics the 1980s is something of a black hole. It's a period that is usually skated over, at best with a cursory reference to the Bermondsey by-election of 1983. But more usually, it's totally ignored, sandwiched between the period that ran from decriminalization at the end of the 60s to the heady days of the GLF in the mid- 70s, and the explosive homophobia of the AIDS era and section 28 that gave rise to the new wave of LGBT activism out of which the legal and social transformations of recent years are generally seen to have emerged. I want to focus our attention on this neglected moment because doing so casts a rather different, *critically feminist* light on the three key terms with which we are concerned today: queer, home, and family.

Back in the early 80s, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. Ronald Reagan was in the White House. The Cold War had been reignited. NATO was stationing a new generation of Cruise and Pershing inter-continental nuclear

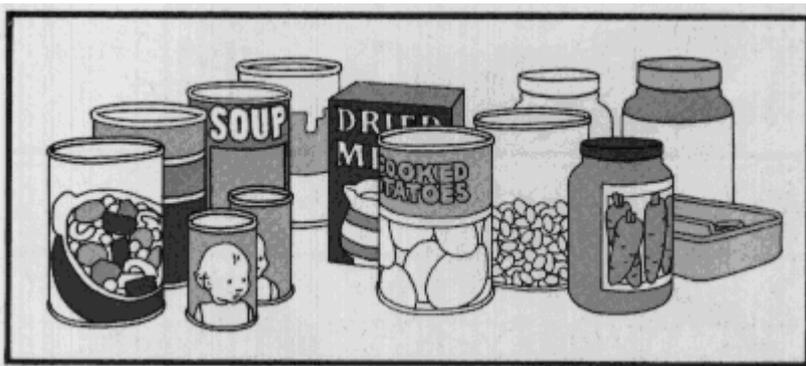
missiles across western Europe and the Soviet Union was doing the same in the east.



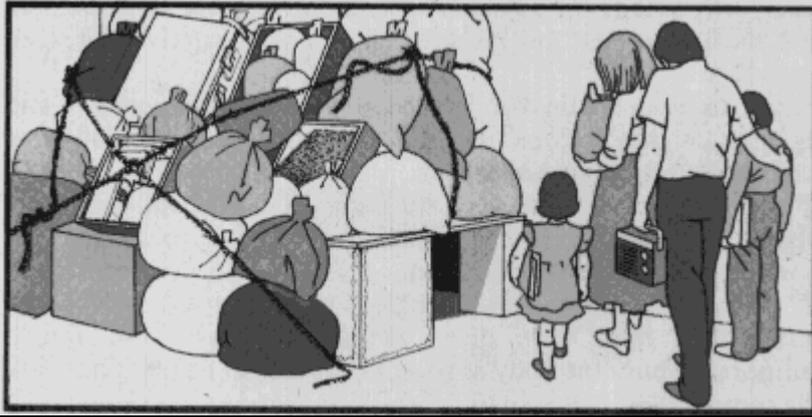
In this context, Her Majesty's Government produced a booklet, "Protect and Survive", which was to be delivered to every household in Britain should the threat of nuclear war escalate significantly, and which meanwhile went on sale to those of a survivalist mentality who wished to prepare themselves to protect their families in advance.



“Protect and Survive” instructed the man of the nuclear family, through clear line-drawings, in how to create a “fall out room” which would (supposedly) be shielded from radioactive fall-out, and then in how to build a refuge within the fall-out room – by removing doors from their hinges and creating a lean-to shelter, weighed down with bags of earth.



Food should be gathered, ready for the moment when the family would enter the shelter, to face their future, crammed together as the bombs rain down outside.



But what would happen to those without homes, or without families, without a father and husband handy with a screwdriver, or a mother and wife to stock up with tins of peaches?

Perhaps, with the virtue of queer hindsight, my obsession with the immanence of nuclear war, my sleepless nights and deep anxiety about nuclear annihilation had something to do with my sense of alienation from the nuclear family that it seemed one needed in order to protect and survive.

My parents were divorced, my mother having proved herself disinclined to spend her life buying and storing tinned peaches, and whilst my father, who had once known how to operate a screwdriver, having trained a cabinet maker, was now sick and disabled, and could not have built a shelter to save our lives.

Moreover, I had expelled myself from what safety and security there might have been in small town, middle England communal life. I made the mistake of falling in love, aged 15, with a girl in the year above – the other girl who proudly wore her CND badge to school, which led, fairly promptly when it became public knowledge, to my being ostracised by my homophobic, pro-nuclear classmates.

Little wonder, then, that I found myself ineluctably drawn to the women's peace camp at Greenham Common – which had been established in 1981 to protest against the installation of Cruise missiles at the United States Air Force base near Newbury in Berkshire.





In 1982 I joined the “Embrace the Base” demonstration and by 1983, having returned on numerous occasions to take part in other actions, I had left school to live there.



Greenham became the focus for feminist anti-nuclear activism, and an inspiration for the peace movement across Europe and beyond, mobilizing over

the years many tens of thousands of women, who went to the camp for a few hours, a few days or made their home there for months and sometimes years.

There is much to be said about the significance and impact of Greenham, but for our purposes today I want to think about how its politics of opposition to nuclear weapons, global militarism and imperialism was also fundamentally a radically queer feminist intervention in the politics of home and family.

Women from all over Britain and beyond, aged from their mid-teens to their 70s and 80s, left their homes, and sometimes their families, to go Greenham. They were from all class backgrounds, and many different occupations. They had previously been politically active as socialists, anarchists, communists, environmentalists, animal liberationists, liberals, Quakers, trade unionists, students and feminists of every hue – and some were political novices. They arrived as unquestioning heterosexuals, occasional bisexuals, and sometimes as confirmed lesbians. And they built a community of protest in which domestic life was lived outdoors, in which homes were turned inside out, and sometimes, families turned upside down.



Sleeping shelters – benders - were built from plastic sheeting, canvas and string, meals were cooked on open fires, which burnt wood gathered from the Common that had to be chopped and stored. Greenham women had to develop new skills and capacities:

- the practical, outdoor survival skills that had, during the past 100 years or so become increasingly gendered masculine
- the political skills and courage to speak in public and explain their work at the hundreds of meetings and rallies to which they were invited,
- the personal confidence to talk to the media, to represent themselves and claim their voices as actors on the global stage

And in so doing they questioned and queered themselves and the relations of gender and sexuality by which they had lived, starting to think and feel differently about what it might mean to be a woman, re-orientating away from the hetero-relations which had structured their lives, and discovering excitement, desire, pleasure and fun in the company, bodies and affection of other women. Personal life was radically de-privatized - and eating, sleeping and even toileting were politicized:



- food was collectively provisioned, and the politics and ethics of what was eaten was fiercely debated
- monogamy was named and critiqued (the couples who built benders on “monogamy mountain” rather than sleeping closer to the fire and the heart of the camp in single person or communal benders were ribbed and teased)



- shit-pits were dug - here in the shape of a women's symbol – and moved around, so as to live lightly on the land.

In the liminal space of this women's community, which was literally right up against the fences of patriarchal militarism and at the same time constituted a prefigurative, utopian world apart, radically counter-normative ways of being and living were forged.

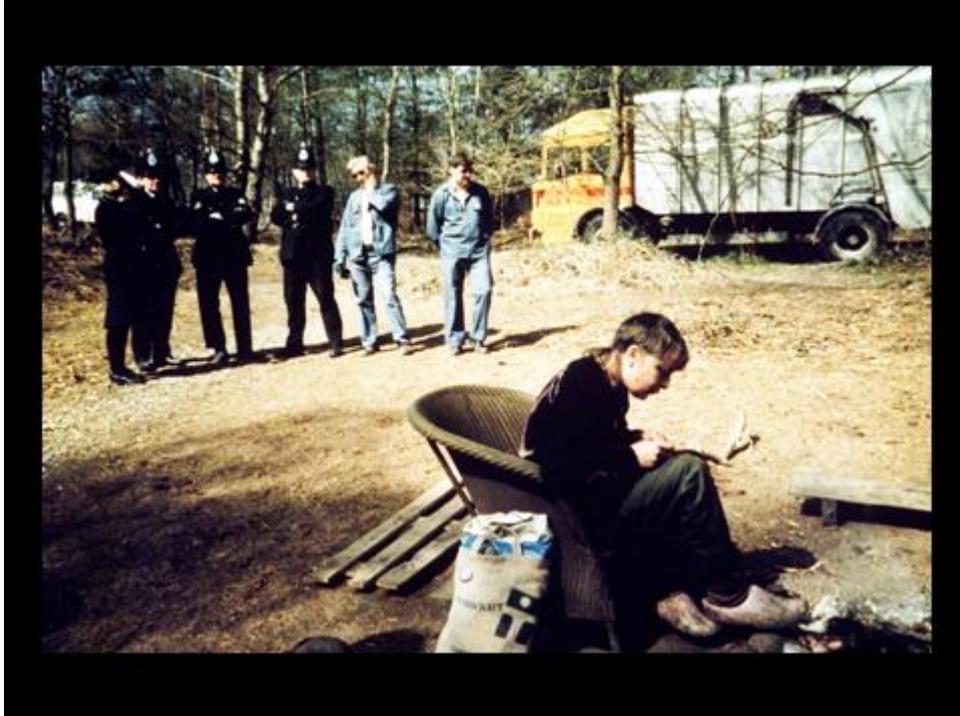
And the state objected.



Over and over again the camp was evicted – initially from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Transport land occupied by the Main Gate camp, and later, after a change in the law, from the Common land on which the other camps were based.



For several years evictions took place up to three times a day, 7 days a week - a cat and mouse game between the specially appointed team of bailiffs and the women



Greenham fundamentally queered the norms of political protest, testing the tolerance of the liberal democratic state that allows dissent as long as, at the end of the day, protesters pack up their banners and head home, back to their families, and the proper project of reproducing the status quo. Greenham women just would not give up; they would not go home, back to their families, as the tabloid press and politicians so regularly instructed them to.

And this was, in large part, because Greenham became home, and the bonds of friendship, care and affection, and often sexual love, forged at Greenham became the life-sustaining forces that women were choosing over the families from whence they came.

"We're here because we're queer because we're here because we're queer..." (Greenham ditty, to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*)



Greenham made a queer home. Anything but the Englishman's castle, it was a home of women choosing to live and act without men, unprotected and unfortified by husbands and fathers.

It was a home that was open to the elements, to the gaze and scrutiny of the world's media, and to vigilante violence of groups of men, both the soldiers and policemen sanctioned by the state, and those acting less legally, who attacked women in their tents and benders, and around the campfires, with bricks and stones and red-hot poker, and verbal abuse (the most common, unimaginably awful insult regularly shouted from passing cars being - "fucking lesbians", to which women - whatever their actual sexual identification - shouted back, "yes, lovely").

Greenham was a home open to any woman who wished to make it her home - there was no membership test to pass, no rent or fee to pay, no set of beliefs to sign up to in advance. Women came and went as they pleased, passing through and settling, settling and passing through. It was a fluid home, that moved around, never quite landing up in exactly the same spot twice after

each eviction, and gradually, over time, constituted of fewer and fewer possessions, and less and less domestic comfort (the caravans and real mattresses of the first year gave way to benders and tents with straw-filled bunks, and finally just goretex sleeping bags under plastic sheeting (which is, of course, the mirror opposite to normal life, where domestic time and progression through a normative life course are marked by the acquisition of things and the increase in domestic comfort)).

Greenham was a home that rested on a belief in the Commons and in shared custodianship of the earth. It resisted claims to ownership of the land that it occupied, and the well-intentioned offers of wealthy supporters to buy adjacent land to make the camp permanent.

It was a home in which debate, disagreement, difference, diversity and sheer obstinate individuality were valued, whilst also emphasising communality, collective decision-making, equality and participation. It was a home that sought constantly to de-centre itself – to resist the centripetal forces of the movements which looked towards it to provide continuity and leadership, looking instead outwards to anti-imperialist, anti-nuclear and feminist struggles across the world (in Nicaragua, Namibia, South Africa, indigenous communities in Australia and the Pacific Islands, as well as in mining communities, women's aid and rape crisis centres nearer home). And Greenham was a home that ultimately dissipated itself as its inhabitants moved on to other things.

But what does all this have to say to us here today, thinking about queer homes and queer families and the contemporary conjuncture?

Above all, I think it expands our historical queer imaginary – in a feminist direction - to recognize the significance of the queer feminist challenges that Greenham posed to notions and practices of home and family.

At a time when images of lesbians in popular culture were almost entirely absent, when the only lesbian in public life was MP Maureen Colquhoun, who was hounded from office because of her sexuality, when female friendship held little cultural value, and young lesbians like myself scoured the public library, finding only the Well of Loneliness and the odd early Women's Press book, when becoming a lesbian seemed to mean signing up to life of social exclusion and a lonely old age, Greenham brought "the L word" into every newspaper – tabloid and broadsheet – and shined like a beacon that beckoned the politically angry, the sexually adventurous, and the generally feministly curious. Many heterosexual (and more than a few non-heterosexual) homes and families broke up as a result, relationships fractured and failed, but new possibilities opened up through these disruptions, not just for the individuals concerned, but much more widely, across culture and society -

Greenham was part of the women's movement that was fundamentally reconfiguring the landscape of gender, sexual and intimate possibility during the 1980s, but it was the particularly loud, vibrant, visible and profoundly queer space within feminist politics that brought the question of why women might choose to work with, live with and love other women into tens of thousands of homes, schools, colleges, political and religious groups in a way that other women's groups had not done.

The making of homes in public, the political act of "occupation" as a form of resistance, has recently been revived on a global scale – but the tenacity, longevity and potency of Greenham as a movement that fundamentally transgressed the gendered, heteronormative dichotomies of public and private, political and personal was arguably far greater.

So, Greenham speaks of a radically queer-feminist history of destabilizing home and family that is, I think, deserving of memory, as we debate the trajectories of normalization, domestication and transformation in lesbian and gay lives.