She's Straight but She's a Dyke: Sexuality Discourse on the Lesbian Lands

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the evolution of sexuality identity markers on the Southern Oregon Lesbian Lands. Research derived from the University of Oregon Special Collections and Archives serves to display the means by which different women understood and made sense of sexuality and sexual orientation. I have found that the term 'lesbian' is better understood as a catch-all word for all of women's same-gender attraction; meaning that includes multi-gender attracted women. This research will give better insight into how umbrella terms, like lesbian, affect who is included (and excluded) throughout both the duration and existence of the lesbian communes, and in current times.

Introduction

The 1970s and 80s held tremendous significance in the history of women's intentional living communities. In Southern Oregon, lesbian lands popped up along the rural portions of the I-5 corridor, running from Eugene to Northern California. These lands served as women's-only communities that were largely self-sufficient and created an entire subculture of a lesbian network that spanned across the United States. The mid-to-late 1970's were a period of revolution due to the uptick in second-wave feminism and the gay liberation movement, and these lands served as an intersection between these two issues.

I am interested in understanding how women on these lands talked about and understood sexuality and the identification markers of women who loved women. The queer community as we know it is ever-evolving in its understanding of acceptable linguistic terminology, and it is worth understanding how that language evolution takes shape in different communities and cultures. The Southern Oregon lesbian lands gives us insight into one of the first geographic spaces where same-gender attraction could be freely and candidly discussed and expressed. In this essay, I will explore how sexuality on the lesbian lands was understood and what linguistic terms meant in the context of that era. This research will give better insight into how umbrella terms like "lesbian" in the 20th century and "queer" in the 21st affect who is included (and excluded) from those terms. This linguistic evolution will give important insight into why certain terms are used and what the implications of chosen rhetoric are, both then and now.

Exploring the primary usage of sexuality self-description is essential in theorizing how women understood sexual identity. The suppression of LGBT history is prominent, and as a result, it is difficult to easily discover archival material with sufficient reference to those narratives. Fortunately, the University of Oregon Special Collections has an incredible collection

of archives pertaining to the Southern Oregon lesbian lands. Particularly, the University of Oregon holds the Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project that spans from the 1960s to 1999. The SO CLAP! collection documents the history of lesbian and women's intentional communities in Southern Oregon through primary sources such as correspondence, media publications, and meeting minutes, to name a few.

In this essay, I will begin by describing the historical context of women loving women just before the conception of the gay liberation and feminist movements in the 60s. Next, I will move to analyzing primary sources from the lesbian lands collections and provide documentation of women's candid conversation about sexuality. In this portion of the essay, I will argue that "lesbian" was used as an umbrella term on the lands which created disparities for both women who fit neatly into the category of "lesbian" and for those who did not. Finally, I will discuss why this linguistic history matters, and how the use of "lesbian" on the lands affects us today.

Methods

My research for this project was conducted almost entirely via the University Special Collections and Archives. Primary sources were pulled from the Southern Oregon Country Lesbians Archival Project collection, but I also utilized media sources outside of the archives to better contextualize my data. For example, I pull from a national magazine outlet called OUT/LOOK to give insight into candid discourse surrounding sexuality and identity formation. These methods are particularly useful because they were produced largely by and for the LGBTQ community. There is great power in being able to freely express one's sexuality, and the primary documents from from the lesbian lands and queer media at-large display the impact of being able to exist and interact within queer-centered spaces.

Historical Background

While significant shifts in lesbian culture occurred over the 1930s and 40s, the 1950s are perhaps the most essential time period that influenced the theorization of lesbian identity formation in the 1970s and 80s. In the 50s, public focus concerning same-gender attraction shifted from the medical study of homosexuality to the criminalization of it. Lillian Faderman in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* asserts that "the 1950's were perhaps the worst time in history for women to love women" (1991:157). Even *suspected* same-gender attraction became grounds for investigating, firing, and incarcerating individuals. The justification predicated itself on the assertion that homosexuality was indicative of a national security threat, and that same-gender attraction presumed that one had a weakened mental state. Specifically, in the 1950s, those who were assumed to have same-gender attraction were deemed easy targets for the U.S.'s enemies because they could easily be blackmailed on the basis of their sexual preferences. Consequently, U.S. government workers could lose their jobs and be outed to their entire community simply if they were suspected to be homosexual (Charles:2012:105).

While some subcultural lesbian organizations were formed, such as the Daughters of Bilitis (the first-ever lesbian political and civil rights organization), harassment and violence against lesbians forced many individuals to remain closeted and silent as a survival tactic (Faderman:1991:150). This suppression of homosexuality was both traumatic and impactful, leading some women to remain in the closet even throughout the 1970s, 80s, and even into the 90s. This painful closeting highlighted the need for women's ability to express their sexuality free from persecution by the state.

In the 1960s, the gay liberation movement began to take fruition and was quintessential in influencing the formation of the Southern Oregon lesbian lands. Historic events such as the Stonewall Rebellion and Compton's Cafeteria Riot in the late 60s marked an eruption of fighting back against LGBT suppression (Faderman:1991:194). Gay liberation also branched out into more specific aims of different identity groups in the LGBTQ community. Thus, lesbian liberation began to diverge from quiet subcultures into a larger, more publically visible movement which combatted the era of the criminalization of homosexuality in the 50s. Gay liberation and the feminist movement walked hand-in-hand to unravel the intersections of sexism and homophobia in the mid-to-late 20th century, which brought into question coalitions between gay men and lesbian women (Faderman:1991:211). Specifically, they experienced oppression differently. While gay men had a personal stake in gay rights, they didn't suffer from misogny in the same way women did. These differences impacted how men and women experienced homophobi, and it became clear that often men in the gay liberation movement were unwilling to priotize combatting sexism in tandem with homophobia. These problemsfurthered the proposition for lesbian women to separate from gay men as a means to strengthen and specify their political goals.

This separation also helped to invoke lesbian feminism, which refers to the idea of committing fully to becoming a lesbian for political reasons. Lesbian feminists aimed to "convert" to homosexuality in the name of women's liberation (Faderman:1991:202). This full-fledged commitment to women coincided with lesbian separatism, or the idea that women ought to fully reject heterosexually-centered society. Lesbian-separatist movements allowed for a sense of community among women who loved women that they could not find elsewhere

(Jo:2005:138). Thus, the need for places like the lesbian lands stem out of the gay liberation movement and the different experiences of gay men and lesbian women.

The suppression of women expressing love for other women in the early-mid 20th century meant that the early 1970s were one of the first times in history that lesbians had the opportunity to express their sexuality. In prior decades, lesbian subcultures appeared sporadically and remained isolated. Lesbian lands were lands where only women who loved women could freely live together. Gay liberation made these conversations possible, and lesbian lands spurred an uptick in lesbian media and community organizing and created a sanctuary from an otherwise heterosexually-dominated society (Burmeister:2014:68). The lesbian lands broke the silence surrounding same-gender attraction, and conversations about sexuality became possible within separatist movements.

Contextual Background--The Feminist Movement and Gay Liberation

The suppression of women expressing love for other women in the early-mid 20th century meant that the early 1970s were one of the first times in history that lesbians had the opportunity to express their sexuality. In prior decades, lesbian subcultures appeared sporadically and remained isolated. Lesbian lands were lands where only women who loved women could freely live together. Gay liberation made these conversations possible, and lesbian lands spurred an uptick in lesbian media and community organizing and created a sanctuary from an otherwise heterosexually-dominated society (Burmeister:2014:68). The lesbian lands broke the silence surrounding same-gender attraction, and conversations about sexuality became possible within separatist movements.

The documentation of the lesbian lands also provides fundamental representation of candid conversations about sexuality. In prior decades, the words “homosexuality” and “lesbian”

were loaded terms that implied disdain, abnormality, and abhorrence. Reclaiming those identity markers were significant— they offered an opportunity to shift the narrative of same-gender attraction characterized by alienation and violence into a positive experience. With historical context, simply claiming oneself as a lesbian was powerful, and something that was impossible to do without repercussions just years prior. Understanding this history gives us insight into how language changes over time. Much of the LGBT vocabulary that is now widespread was largely unmapped territory in the 1970s; women on the lands were working with the minimal language they had available to them to express their understanding of sexuality.

In addition, second-wave feminism in the 1970's gives context to the formation of Southern Oregon lesbian lands and women's intentional communities. Women in the 1970s fought for equal pay, abortion access, access to higher education, and basic economic freedoms, like being able to own a credit card without the permission of a spouse (Bergeron:2015). Women who were uninterested in relationships with men experienced significant setbacks in access to the political sphere; they did not have access to financial assets like women with husbands might. While heterosexual women faced their own facets of sexism, husbands granted them the potential to be able to be approved to have a credit card or own property. Lesbians, on the other hand, would not be granted the ability to gain those same opportunities because of their lack of a male partner. Regardless of the gender of one's partner, women within the feminist movement identifies the need to be able to be independent from men, regardless of their relationships with them. Consequently, the feminist movement of the 70s shed light on lesbians' struggles living independently from men. For example, buying land to build women's intentional communities without the co-signing of men was not only a lesbian-activist issue, but a feminist issue. The independence of women in the feminist movement coincided heavily with lesbian lands, as the

two are deeply entwined with one another. The feminist movement helped propel lesbians toward self-sufficiency, which was essential for the survival of the lesbian lands. If women could not build credit, buy land, or receive equitable wages, lesbian separatist movements would remain futile impossibilities.

Another significant aspect of the feminist movement was that it helped to conceptualize the idea of the "lesbian-feminist.'' Faderman describes lesbian-feminists as women who "chose to be lesbians. They identified their problems as stemming from society's attitudes toward women, and lesbianism was… an integral part of the solution to those problems (1991:189). The lesbian lands could cater to both "essentialist lesbians" (women who believe to have been born inherently lesbian) and those who were lesbian in the name of feminism. This highlights an important question of choice in terms of sexuality. Can sexuality be chosen, or is sexuality an inherent biological phenomenon? This understanding of lesbianism as a political choice is vastly different from mainstream narratives of contemporary sexuality, in that some individuals actively chose to be a part of a marginalized identity category in the name of anti-oppression efforts. Currently, there is a strong pull toward the "born this way" perspective that asserts people simply don't choose their sexuality, and thus they shouldn't be oppressed because of an inherent, biological trait. There is certain power in claiming and choosing to be a part of the queer movement, which challenges this current model of understanding one's non-heterosexual inclinations.

It is also worth noting that the feminist movement at-large was not homogenously lesbian-friendly. Renowned author and feminist, Betty Friedan, noted in 1969 that what she called the "lavender menace" threatened the "political efficacy of… feminism" (Gilmore and Kraminski:2007:96). Much of the women's movement focused on the political struggles of

heterosexual women--domestic labor, childrearing, abortion access and gender equity were on the forefront of activists' minds. Lesbianism seemed to be a step in a different direction; for many, child rearing, reproductive rights, and power dynamics in partnerships were vastly different. While heterosexual women might have been fighting for the right to acknowledge the additional labor they do in their homes or the right to have an abortion, lesbians were simultaneously fighting for their right to be gainfully employed without discrimination and against their children being taken away from them because of their sexual orientation. This meant that while heterosexual women's and lesbians aims were similar in some capacity, lesbians needed to look to other places for solidarity and coalition building. The Lesbian Lands provided women the opportunity to be completely separated from mainstream heterosexual society.

The Lesbian Lands

The 1950s and 60s mark the apex of the Back to the Land movements in the United States, in which different communities migrated to rural areas in the name of political radicalism. These movements most often highlighted anti-capitalist economic systems, communal living, and self-sufficiency (Wilbur:2013:149). In the late 1960s, the Southern Oregon Lesbian Lands began to develop with the influence of these movements. Southern Oregon proved to be ideal because of its cheap land, temperate weather, and was tucked in between hippie hot spots, like San Francisco and Portland (Burmeister:2013:4).

The Southern Oregon Lesbian Lands were founded on equity, spirituality, and self-sustaining practices. Many women on the lands recall group meetings lasting for hours, because consensus was needed before they could adjourn. Political correctness and identity self-awareness was idealized, and applications for many of the communes created a point list for

terms of entry. In other words, the more marginalized an applicant was, the more ideal of a candidate they were for the commune (tokenism seemed to play a large part in deciding who would occupy the lands). Women on the Lesbian Lands had many flaws, like the rest of the feminist and gay liberation movements from the mid-late 1900s, but they provided an important space for women to be able to express their gender and sexuality outside the realm of mainstream social structures.

Findings: Discourse on the Lesbian Lands

Further, many of the primary accounts of conversations about sexuality described a vastly different understanding of lesbianism as compared to how it is contemporarily understood. While in the early 21st century, the term "lesbian" may be interpreted as women who are exclusively attracted to women, it was used as a much more generalized term in the era of the lesbian lands. For example, one graduate student at Southern Oregon University conducted a survey of self-identified lesbian women who frequented a local grocery store in Ashland (a small town in Southern Oregon). Of all the women surveyed, almost 70% were at some point married to men, with an average marriage lasting 19 years (SO CLAP! collections). While we might understand at least some of these women to be attracted to both men and women, the term lesbian was what they felt could best describe them. In the linguistic evolution of the term "lesbian," this use of the word, albeit contemporarily imprecise, helps conceptualize why self-description is important. It asks us to make sense of what it meant to be a lesbian on the women's lands, and who was included and excluded under that label. Additionally, it becomes clear through these primary documents that lesbianism and heterosexuality may better be understood as descriptive of actions an individual engaged in rather than an identity label.

There are two competing claims prominent within contextual understandings of sexuality. On one hand, the lesbian community and the heterosexual community were considered strict binaries. Women had to choose which one they would commit to. For example, one woman on the lesbian lands discusses a study of women that she conducted. In one interview, a woman recounts, "When [I] decided to explore the heterosexual world for a time… the lesbian comunity 'turned on me… they don't accept that'" (SO CLAP! collection). The world operated in two strict binaries--the heterosexual world and the lesbian world. There were some mentions of bisexuality, although they were less prominent than discussions of lesbianism and more frequently were overlooked in discourse within the queer community.

The second claim identifies the inclusion of all women committed to women under the umbrella of 'lesbian.' Women frequently struggled to grapple with existing inside within the category of lesbian while also having past relationships with men. In one journal, a woman who consistently self-identified as bisexual wrote about an experience in being interrogated about her sexuality,

> "I was not going to say I was a lesbian. I had been straight for 3/ yrs. I hardly remembered that i was a lesbian. It almost seemed irrelevant. What did this term mean to me? How could i, who had been straight for so long, now to be punished for being a lesbian?" (SO CLAP! collections).

It seems that many women understood their identities as dependent on the gender of the person they were in a relationship with, rather than a descriptor of what genders they were interested in. While we might understand sexual orientation contemporarily as an explanation of past or potential future partners' genders, general understandings of sexuality in the 70s, 80s and 90s point to sexual orientation as describing solely current interests in specific genders. As seen above, a woman understood herself as straight in the past, and lesbian in the present, rather than

as someone whose sexuality is fluid and subject to change. Sharon Dale Stone recalls her experiences within lesbian communities in the 70s and 80s, remarking that sexuality was understood in terms of absolutes, "dichotomized as either heterosexual or homosexual" (1996:101). Lesbian, at least on the Southern Oregon communes, served as an indicator that a woman was completely committed to women, and uninterested in thinking about, discussing, or engaging with men in any capacity.

The usage of "lesbian" as an umbrella term raises the question of where bisexual women fit into the narrative of the lesbian lands. Much of the literature about the LGBT community, which was referred to in academia as Gay and Lesbian Studies, ignored bisexuality as a category in favor of theorizing about those who were "fully" homosexual. In the documentation of the lesbian lands, it becomes clear that the only two prominent and viable sexuality categories that existed were lesbian and heterosexual. In a communal journal from the Oregon Women's Land Farm in 1974, a woman detailed a visit to the land from an acquaintance, "Today: Ann's old high school ex-girlfriend showed up today. No judgements. She's straight. But a dyke"(SO CLAP! collections). Similar sentiments appear all throughout the SO CLAP! collection. This contradictory discourse is important for two primary reasons. The first important aspect to notice is the woman's use of the word "dyke" as compared to "lesbian." Dyke, in this context, describes a focus on socioeconomic and class status, which is particularly important for women on the lesbian lands. (Maltz:1999:91). Understanding this woman as simultaneously as straight and also a dyke speaks to the element of class-based solidarity that is prominent on an economically conscious commune. The second noteworthy aspect of this quote is the dichotomy of being recognized as both "straight" and a "dyke." A woman who previously dated someone on the lesbian lands is seen as embodying two seemingly mutually exclusive categories. In this capacity, it becomes

clear that women often grappled with the lack of language they had available to them to describe the complexities and fluidity of sexuality. Instead of being understood as a (traitorous) bisexual, this particular woman represented the bridge between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This comment also points to the fluidity within the political and social spheres. Women considered to be "straight" could also encompass the "dyke" category as a homage to their commitment to feminist or class-based social movements. The fluidity of these terms also came to serve as major players in the formation of the term "queer" and the political connotations of its terminology.

Despite this evidence of more fluid understandings of sexual-political identity, there is a strong display of describing bisexual women as either heterosexual or lesbian, depending on who they decided to be in a relationship with. This is exemplary of how bisexuals were portrayed at-large, commonly described as "'fence sitters,' dangerously untrustworthy because of their association with men" (Stone:2008:101). Bisexuality was perceived as a less relevant aspect of lesbianism, if not outright vilified by the lesbian community. In one collected personal journal, a woman wrote about her experience describing her bisexuality to a prospective partner. She notes,

> "She also asked me when I was last with a man. She's been a lesbian since 12, never been with a man. I told her of my fling a year and a half ago, and that it had been a year before that. I explained the conditions of my bisexuality. 'So you're a dangerous wommin,' huh… I explain that I've no desire for them anymore. That I can get off sexually on them, but it is no longer interesting. But i can always be attracted (?) i've accepted before. She said maybe I should follow my feelings. I repeated that being w/ them got me nowhere wasn't a growing experience, just a repeat of what I'd already done" (SO CLAP! collections).

This passage is particularly telling in how bisexuality was perceived on the lesbian lands and why "lesbian" may have been considered the only viable option for women who were committed to other women. Women who self-identified as bisexual were considered to be unreliable and potentially threatening to the community building of the lesbian community. If a woman had the opportunity to choose a heterosexual-passing relationship, many in the community thought bisexual women would jump at the chance to choose the "easier" life trajectory. This also accurately reflects similar academic sentiments in the theorization of lesbianism and bisexuality. In a 1981 essay, "Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance," Cheryl Clarke, a lesbian poet and black feminist, writes that bisexuality is a safer label to choose as compared to lesbianism, because it presumes that there might be a possibility of a relationship with men. (1981:130). Bisexual women could find themselves in a double bind in these two competing narratives of their sexuality; either they played it safe and remained with men or they were perceived as traitors even if they committed themselves to other women because of their perceived risk of returning to the world of heterosexuality.

This also isn't to say that lesbian women were simply being unjustly angry toward women whose sexuality was more fluid, but rather the choice to be content living a heterosexually-passing lifestyle was one that many women couldn't make. For women who understood themselves to be born, inherently, as lesbians, they feared losing the coalition building from women who could choose the gender of their partners. In hindsight, this problem might have been better solved if bisexual women were understood to be non-heterosexual regardless of the gender of their partner, and if they had been unconditionally accepted in lesbian circles. But the resounding conclusion that women on the communes came to, albeit

subconsciously, was that the term “lesbian” provided a successful means by which women could make their devotion to other women clear.

You Don’t Have to be a Lesbian to be a Lesbian

It becomes clear that for a woman to be best understood in her commitment to women, whether it be political, sexual, or both, that marking oneself as a “lesbian” brought much less rhetorical baggage than the term “bisexual” did. It indicated a fully-fledged devotion to women, whereas bisexuality was still understood to be only moderately committed. If a woman wanted to take part in the women’s communities of Southern Oregon, self-describing as a lesbian was the best way to do so. Although this seems to have quashed the ability for one to find the term that best fit who they were attracted to, the term “lesbian” was utilized to create a far-reaching network of women loving women. In one woman’s words, “by separating ourselves, wemoon [sic] refuse to be accessible to men and we are able to take control of our own situations” (SO CLAP! collections). The lesbian lands were powerful in holding physical space for women to separate themselves from dominant narratives of sexuality, and held great significance in women-loving-women’s coalition and community building.

Specifically, understanding the shift from the medicalization and criminalization of the word “lesbian” to an empowering use of the term by lesbians was an important leap for same-gender attracted women. It gave them the first opportunity to begin exploring what it meant to be a lesbian without the identity being entrenched in stereotypes of deviance and abnormality. This commitment to women who loved women was important and necessary for many; yet it also excluded women who may have benefited greatly from that community. Regardless, it served as an important and necessary building block in the evolution of LGBT linguistic choice and created the opportunity for that evolution to occur.

After the initial push from the gay liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s, the term 'lesbian' began to rise in popularity as a positively associated catch-all term for women who loved women. Heather Burmeister argues that the lesbian lands created a "safe space for women to recreate themselves, and to construct and express...identity…"(2013:2). The lesbian lands of Southern Oregon were unique in that it was one of the first women-only spaces that provided sanctuary from an otherwise patriarchally and heterosexually-centered society. It provided ample space to both physically and mentally separate from prominent homophobic narratives, and create new, more positive ones. As a result of that move toward separatism, language became essential to understanding who was included in those communities. As a means of solidarity, lesbianism was used as an umbrella term for all women who loved women (Laurie:2009:355). As a means to separate from other identity categories, women's intentional communities were commonly understood as homogeneously lesbian. This is important in understanding lesbianism as a term that encompasses a broad experience of women who love women or women who choose to be with women. For example, one woman that had just moved to the Oregon Women's Land Farm wrote in a journal, "I, Leila Faber… feminist… soon to be a lesbian…" highlights the ways that lesbian was a category women could move into as a means to create solidarity (SO CLAP! Collection). The same woman later writes in her journal, "why does being a lesbian politicize me?" As soon as Leila begins her journey on the lesbian lands, she starts to grapple with the ways that sexuality is an inherently political subject. While heterosexuality is considered neutral and apolitical in dominant societal narratives, the "choice" to be a lesbian came with some significant social implications.

In addition, labeling our experiences and identifying them with common social themes is a categorical human urge that allows us to relate to one another and build community.

Understanding the social and linguistic implications of "lesbian" also helps to better contextualize what impacts sexuality terminology had in these women's intentional communities and where other women (like bisexual women) fit into that narrative. This contextualization is significant in that it granted women access to language that described their experiences with same-gender attraction. One woman who lived on the lesbian lands wrote, "I had just become involved in my first lesbian relationship and was eager to become a part of the women's community" (SO CLAP! collection). How we discuss our experiences can be incredibly informative in understanding and forming our social world. This community gave women a space to express their sexuality and relate to one another in terms of their same-gender attraction. While this woman might not have had access to women who experienced attraction or interest in women, the lesbian lands provided her with the opportunity to be around people who she could relate to. The opportunity for community-building was essential for the formation of identity and linguistic terminology because it provided a space for women to freely explore those terms as they saw fit.

Another important aspect of the above quotation is the description of being a part of a "women's community" rather than the "lesbian community." It was prominent in the achives that "lesbian" would be replaced with "women," particularly in public media sources. This seems to have been a rhetorical strategy to code the lesbian lands differently in the eye of the public as compared to within the physical proximity of the lands themselves. While women were explicit in their devotion to same-sex attraction on the lands, like the woman who wrote the OWL pledge of allegiance, which began with "I pledge allegiance to the clitoris," descriptions of women's lands acted as a safety net for describing the communes as feminist spaces, rather than lesbian spaces (SO CLAP! Collection). These rhetorical strategies are worth noting in that "lesbian" was

not always a safe term to use in a largely anti-lesbian social world. There are plenty of spaces where this language coding was popularized. For example, “women’s music” emerged as a category of music made by women, for women, that also served as a WLW-friendly space. Although it was marketed as for women, it functioned as one of the few events where the norms of heterosexuality were less prominent.

Adrienne Rich’s theorization of lesbianism serves as a crucial argumentation in understanding how both heterosexuality and homosexuality throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s were conceptualized. Rich argues that heterosexuality has been chronically imposed on women as natural, however all women are inherently lesbians in some capacity. Rich specifically argues against the idea that lesbianism is sexual. Rather, it’s a political and social commitment to women, which parallels the ways that women on the lesbian lands understood the term. She terms the “lesbian continuum” to describe the wide range of ways in which women can engage in same-gender relationships (1980:659). Consequently, even self-described heterosexual women were understood to be victims of compulsory heterosexuality, deprived of their own inclination toward women, sexual and otherwise. This theorization is important because it describes the ways that theorists conceptualized of women’s identity options. Particularly, women who had access to feminist theory were likely introduced to Rich’s work. If one was aware of their status under patriarchal and heteronormative institutions, it became apparent that “lesbian” could be their alternative choice in self-description.

However, this also led to exclusion in the lesbian lands, particularly for bisexual women. Because some women confined the term “lesbian” as focusing on exclusively same-sex sexuality, the term left some women ostracised from the community. Among those were bisexual

women, anti-patriarchal straight women who were still committed to feminist ideals, and trans women. While the term lesbian created the opportunity for coalition-building, it also produced the misfortune for women who pursued relationships with men *and* women to be excluded from those communities. The idea of bisexual women acting as "traitors" is also not unique to just the lesbian lands. In one academic article from the 1990s, Paula Rust argues that bisexuality poses a "political threat to… hard-won victories" within the gay liberation movement (1995:16). Bisexuality was percieved as an orientation in which individuals were incapable of "deciding" their sexual orientation, and that they were only half-willing to commit themselves to lesbian and feminist causes. These lands offered a community in which women were free to explore their sexuality, but only if they refused to engage with men. This meant that although "lesbian" as an umbrella term helped build community, it also created barriers as to who was or wasn't allowed in that community. As more fluid understandings of sexuality arose, the need for a new, more all-encompassing term became apparent.

At the tail-end of the lesbian separatist movement in the late 80s and 90s, the LGBT community began to invoke the word "queer" as a new umbrella term. In the *Queer Nation Manifesto* from 1990, the ACT UP organization described "queer" as

> "about the freedom to be public, to be just who we are. It means everyday fighting against oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self hatred… it's about being on the margins, defining ourselves...we are an army because we have to be." (1990).

This new definition was the first full-scale attempt at utilizing an all-encompassing word to describe diverse facets of the LGBT community. However, it's also worth mentioning that queer has gendered implications, as well. ACT-UP primarily focused on the epidemic experienced by

gay men, and while it slowly became more all-encompassing, was less available to individuals outside of that category. That being said, queer was an important jumping-off point to create terminology that could be utilized to encompass and welcome all non-heterosexual or cisgender people. It also pulled from radical activism and the need to move away from historically white and upper-class centered activism. In addition, one significant reason for this shift was a result of the move away from binaristic thinking about heterosexuality and homosexuality (Motschenbacher and Stegu: 2013:527). The need for a more fluid and coherent understanding of gender and sexual orientation led to this new linguistic development. In addition, the use of 'queer' by non-heterosexual individuals served as a new locus of power. Prior to the early 1990's, "queer" was primarily a derogatory term that armed homophobes. The reclamation of the term allowed for a positive, self-referential definition of queer. This focus addressed many of the limitations of "lesbian" as an umbrella term, and the subsequent coalition and community building created a larger and more all-encompassing community that opened up the possibilities for self-identification. However, this also pushes us to question the limitations of "queer" as an umbrella term. The linguistic evolution of lesbian serves as a cautionary tale to understand language as ever-changing and evolving, rather than stationary or stagnant. This history helps us in understanding contemporary linguistic choices, but also aids us in remaining sensitive to exploring potential problems within the terminology of "queer."

Conclusion: The Potential and Danger in All-Inclusive Identity Categories

Sexuality discourse on the lesbian lands gives important historical context to the evolution of linguistic choice in the LGTBQ community. In particular, queer history tends to be suppressed and overlooked throughout academia and archival data, and preserving important

moments in the context of their era remains a huge task in progress. Understanding the significance of how we talk about sexuality can give great insight into how that evolution occurred, and what spurred the shift from “lesbian” to “queer.” The lessons we learn from the highlights and downfalls of the political implications of the term “lesbian” can also serve as an important caution to language remaining chronic and stagnant. While “queer” as a catch-all term seems relevant and appropriate now, it is necessary that we continue to search for potential issues that may arise as a result of that linguistic choice. While history may not repeat itself, it certainly echoes, and the ways that we discuss sexuality should continue to be questioned, challenged, and shifted to better synthesize the needs of the queer community.

A Note on Language

I feel that this paper would be incomplete without making specific reference to the language women on the lesbian lands used to describe their gender identity. In many of the archives I pull from in this paper, terms like ‘wemoon,’ ‘womyn,’ and ‘wimmin,’ are used. While this provided power for the women on the lands to describe their experiences of womanhood without the infiltration of men, it would be irresponsible of me not to mention the harmful means by which these words have also been used. Specifically, in recent years, the term ‘womyn’ has been used to exclude and erase transgender women from the feminist movement. While this paper does not directly grapple with this issue, the second wave feminist movement is famous for its bioessentialist focus and suppression of trans histories (Peters 2017). More work deserves to be done in recognizing the harm and suppression that the history of these labels have contributed to, both on and off the Southern Oregon Lesbian Lands.

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