



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT ON LESBIAN LANDS: CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS



Nithi Deivanayagam and Nitsa Kehoe

Introduction

Women throughout history have stood in the face of inequality, usually due to gender stereotyping and biases. This research goes into the women's experiences at WomanShare, a lesbian land community in Southern Oregon, to understand how their diverse skills, commitment to education, and mentorship dynamics contribute to their success in communal living and foster a culture of empowerment. By working together to learn, teach, and carry out roles that were traditionally held by men, women at WomanShare were able to create a space of individuality and feminism. The research draws on primary sources, including interviews and writings from community members, portraits, and academic sources that contextualize the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Research

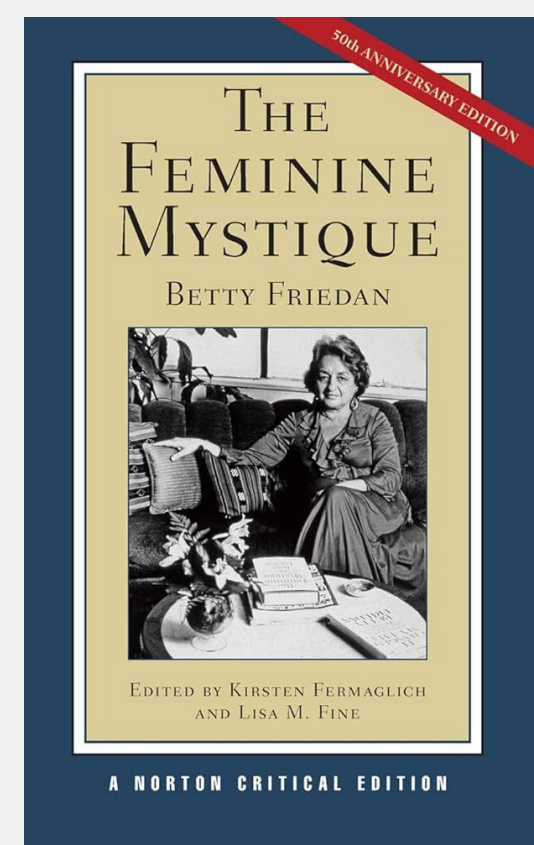
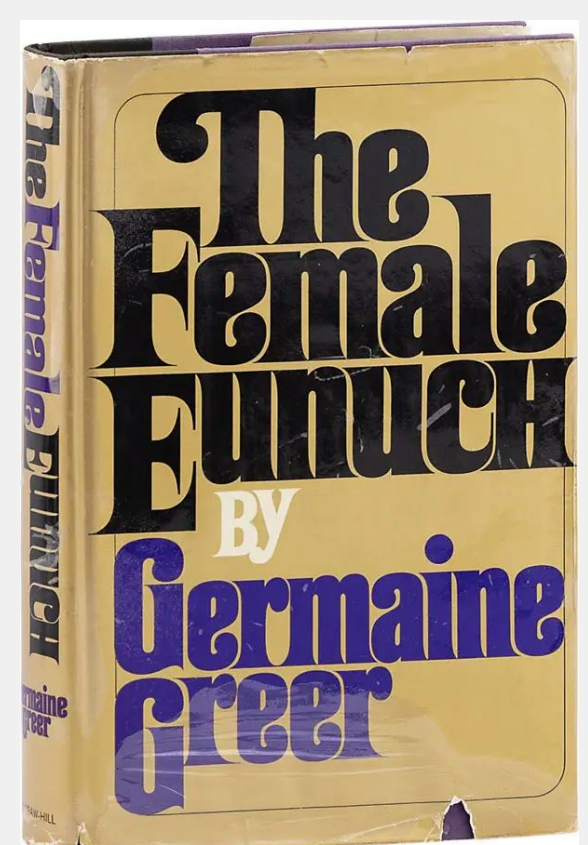
Same-sex communities, such as WomanShare, provided women with a safe space to fulfill roles and learn skills that have historically been occupied by men and, thus, intentionally fight back against gender biases.

Historical Context

- ★ Workforce issues
 - Pay gap
 - Gender inequality
 - Stereotypes and biases

★ "a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States" (Friedan, 1963, pg 15)

★ "For the first time in history, the sex war is being fought out by women in the name of women" (Greer, 1970, pg 11.)



Newsletter, WomanShare Records, Coll 269, Box 2, Folder 4



Carol Newhouse Photographs and Papers, Coll 431, Box 1, Folder 7



EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE
WomanShare has a reservoir of experience and expertise. This is most important on a day-to-day level, where expertise is provided by the resident caretaking collective. Some of the current skills available are:

- Building design and construction
- Building and grounds maintenance
- Health and healing skills
- Gardening and food production
- Community and political activism
- Group process and facilitation
- Program planning and production
- Education
- Accounting
- Art production
- General country skills

Valuable expertise is also available from the larger WomanShare organization and supporters. Some examples are:

- Fund raising
- Accounting
- Health care and counseling
- Video production
- Music, art, writing
- Legal assistance
- Mediation and group facilitation

Newsletter, WomanShare Records, Coll 269, Box 2, Folder 4

WOMANSHARE NEEDS:

- 1.) We're still saving money for our 'Main House' fund. If you can contribute it would be appreciated.
- 2.) We're looking for an apprentice to help build the new cabin, from July thru September. She needs to have basic carpentry skills, and some experience with power tools. In exchange we offer room, board, and the opportunity of learning how to build a cabin from the ground up. The project will be supervised by Shannon who has built several cabins. Contact Shannon for more details.

Newsletter, WomanShare Records, Coll 269, Box 2, Folder 4

PROJECTS IN PROCESS:

- 1.) A wheelchair-accessible composting outhouse is being built.
- 2.) Plans for a new cabin are in process, to replace an old cabin which is rotting away. Location and size will be decided by the cabin committee (Shannon, Connie, & Billie.)
- 3.) Extensive garden work.

Legacies + Outcomes

- ★ Women are still paid less than men for the same jobs, but it has decreased by 50%
- ★ WomanShare acted as a place for women to escape gender norms and stereotypes
- ★ Women fill more managerial and leadership roles
- ★ Lesbian lands helped women find their potential and learn skills that could translate into real-world occupations (like gardening, carpentry, etc)

Building Capabilities

- ★ "Our goals for ourselves were to make a family, to learn to live together... We wanted to learn new skills, and then teach what we learned" (Burmeister, 2013, pg. 61).
- ★ "Affinity groups came out of potluck go-arounds when an individual would bring up a life situation that she thought other members might have in common" (McCourt, 2000, pg. 29)."
- ★ "Workshops offer opportunities for members who conduct workshops professionally to try out new formats" (McCourt, 2000, pg. 28)
- ★ "With help from other lesbians in the growing community, she built a small hexagon-shaped cabin. She also built an outdoor bed to entertain the potential lover she longed for." (Kleiner, 2003, pg. 31).

Strength in Occupations

- ★ "Women working together can do more... faster" (Building Diary, WomanShare Records, Coll 269, Box 4, Folder 5)
- ★ "Though I work every day among men / I am learning this trade from women" (Women Working: Poems and Pictures, Carol Newhouse Photographs and Papers, Coll 431, Box 1, Folder 3)
- ★ When I have tried to learn a skill from men I have often felt inadequate, stupid... I felt incompetent because I couldn't understand the terms being thrown around... I felt like I had to act like I knew more than I really did so that I wouldn't get men's ridicule. I never felt like I could ask a man to teach me something simple (Building Diary, WomanShare Records, Coll 269, Box 4, Folder 5)

WomanShare is organized as a non-profit corporation, a group of three to eight women who work as the caretaking collective and also carry out the projects of the organization. Along with the caretaking collective, former residents and other community members take an active role in providing direction and support for projects.

Newsletter, WomanShare Records, Coll 269, Box 2, Folder 4