

Un-Defining Lesbianism: Examining the Genderqueer Space of Lesbian Identity

Introduction

Throughout my research in queer and trans studies, I have noticed the distinction of “queer” vs. “gay and lesbian” movements. Although this is used to distinguish more radical movements from neoliberal ones, respectively, the naming and separation of these categories has also subtly constructed identities like “gay” and “lesbian” as being less useful than ones like “queer.” I have also found the description of lesbianism as “limiting” typically coming from white scholars in relation to claiming that established Western identities cannot work for those in the Global South, failing to include the experiences of Western people of color, as well as immigrants who do not fit neatly into the South/North dynamic.

This essay is not without its biases; I am a nonbinary Black lesbian, and my identities have certainly helped in my motivation to analyze this topic; however, it seems like less clearly defined words like “queer” are preferred for their nebulousness and inability to be defined by legal parties. I argue that despite its essentialism in recent queer/trans studies, lesbianism exists this way, too; for many, “lesbian” has existed as a gender/fluid space of identity which encompasses both gender and sexuality, rather than its current definition of “a gay woman”¹. I hope to combine my personal experiences with lesbianism with scholarship that analyzes the way we think about

¹ Taken from the Google definition of “lesbian.” This is because Google is the most ubiquitous search engine in the U.S., partially demonstrated by the fact that the phrase, “look it up,” has been replaced by “Google it.” If a person did not know what a lesbian was, they would Google it, and take up this definition. Although I am talking about queer/trans studies, the way that lesbianism is talked about in queer/trans studies is based on common social understandings of it, so this layman’s definition of lesbianism is still relevant.

gender in relation to sexuality, along with analyses that show how lesbianism is essentialized. I argue that despite the lived experiences of many queer individuals over decades and the evolution of queer and trans theory, the definition of “lesbian” has evolved to be conceptually less inclusive, as many current scholarly writings create their definitions of lesbianism around cisgender women’s identity. I show how the current theoretical context of lesbianism as exclusively revolving around womanhood does not serve queerness, theory, and/or racialized individuals, in order to help us move on to a more constructive understanding.

Experiences of Genderqueer Lesbianism

I began identifying as a lesbian in my teens when I realized I experienced no physical or romantic attraction to men. A few years later, around age 19, I began to realize that the way I conceptualized my experience of womanhood did not line up with experiences of cisgender women (I specify cisgender women because I am AFAB); however, I didn’t feel uncomfortable in my lesbian identity. As I experienced this, I found other lesbians online who articulated that they also existed in a confusing space of gender, expressing that the only thing they felt concretely was their lesbian identity. I found many who joked that their gender *was* lesbian, despite its social definition being that of a sexuality. I felt this as well, and it made sense to me. Lesbianism has always existed in a space of gender play: apart from identities of femme and butch, there is a long history of women anachronistically presenting as men to be able to marry their wives; cult classics such as *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters explore spaces where butch women and gay men share similarities in identity; and even now, many queer people joke about instances where a gay man met a twink that he hit it off with at a bar,

only to realize he'd been flirting with a lesbian the whole time, or vice versa. I use these examples to emphasize that our experiences with lesbianism existing in a space of murky gender has long historical precedent—only now, there is different language for it. One of the reasons I note this is as lesbians, we already exist outside of the Western social definition of what a “woman” is *supposed* to be, which extends even further for women of color.

Race and Sexuality

Siobhan Somerville's first chapter of *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* was foundational for my ability to have language as to why I did not *feel* like a woman/girl, despite being raised as one; due to its importance, I will break down her analyses in order to help conceptualize my current issues with the theoretical explorations of lesbianism. Somerville notes in her “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body,” that she aimed to “understand how discourses of race and gender buttressed one another, often competing, often overlapping, in shaping emerging models of homosexuality,”² showing that “[a]ll... models [in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] constructed both the nonwhite body and the nonheterosexual body as pathological to greater or lesser extents.”³ Although the most prominent sexologists were European, their work left a great mark on understandings of sexuality and race in the United States; these ideas that sexologists, psychologists, and other “experts” were based on colonial and

² Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 17.

³ Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 17.

white supremacist ideals of what gender, sex, and race were supposed to look like. Combined with the fact that these prominent ideas came to the fore less than a century and a half ago, and the fact we can clearly see the ways that colonial ideas have continued to impact people across the world, it is unsurprising that the ways in which lesbians and people of color do not fit into white standards of gender are still relevant in current constructions of identity. It is also noteworthy that in other colonized, such as Latin America, similar pathologizations of queerness took place: “Mexican anthropologist Hector Carrillo describes the traditional operation of this gender-sexuality system in Mexico as creating men through non-men. . . . Carrillo notes the distinction between, ‘. . . masculine men were *hombres* or *machos*,’ and ‘. . . their counterparts were the effeminate men, the *maricones*, who were perceived as having forfeited their manhood altogether.”⁴

In her summary of scientific racism, Somerville states that, “According to the logic of recapitulation [ranking racial groups based on “evolutionary” (pseudo-intellectual ability) status], adult African Americans [of any gender] and white women were at the same stage as white male children [intellectually] and therefore represented an ancestral stage in the evolution of white males.”⁵ I highlight this passage, not only to show how recent scientific racism is in the United States’ history, but also to emphasize the ways in which Black women were not considered women at all in the scientific logic of the time, which is an idea that permeates in culture now, with rhetoric of women of color being too “mannish.” Furthering this analysis, Somerville goes on to state, that

⁴ Solís y Martínez, Daniel E. “Mestiza/o Gender: Notes towards a Transformative Masculinity,” (Routledge, 2013), 407.

⁵ Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 24.

despite much more recent scientific discovery being biased toward white men, that sexological science was conceptualized through the bodies of Black women and lesbians. This was done through mutilation and non-consensual probing of women such as Saartje Baartman (also objectified through the name “Hottentot Venus”), who was found noteworthy for having “protruding buttocks.”⁶ The bodies of other African women were objectified as well, with scientists finding that the size of their labia minora were unlike that of any “ordinary varieties of the human species.”⁷ This notion is important for relating how lesbians were similarly not constructed as women:

One of the most consistent medical characterizations of both African American women and lesbians was the myth of an unusually large clitoris... medical journals... [declared] that ‘a physical examination of [female homosexuals] will practically in every instance disclose an abnormally prominent clitoris.’ Significantly, this author added, ‘This is particularly so in colored women.’⁸

She goes on to state, after quoting a physician’s analysis of a lesbian woman’s body that, “The ‘fleshy sacs’ of this woman, like the ‘apendages’ fetishized in the earlier account [the language used to describe Saartje Baartman’s buttocks], invoked the anatomy of a phantom male body inhabiting the lesbian’s anatomical features.”⁹ Both of these quotes are absolutely *fundamental* for fully understanding why the definition of “woman” means—subtly or overtly—that a woman is white, cisgender, and heterosexual. Particularly as the physician imagined a “phantom male” in the lesbian, it can lead us to

⁶ Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 26.

⁷ Flower and Murie, 208, as quoted in Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 26.

⁸ Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 27.

⁹ Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 29.

one of the reasons—apart from (presumably white) lesbians being likened to Black women, which, as previously stated, were constructed as not-women—that lesbians, particularly butch lesbians, are perceived as trying, yet failing, to be men.

I say all this, not to argue that due to the rules of white supremacy, as a Black lesbian that I *cannot* be a woman (or that any queer woman of color cannot be a woman), but rather, because it helped me explain why I felt alienated and excluded by social definitions of womanhood: as an AFAB Black lesbian, I was *already* constructed as not-woman; with these othered identities combined, I would never be able to fulfill the social rules of “womanhood.” Something that I hope I have exemplified is that both binary genders are defined by their difference from each other, with women always being defined by their relation to men in the case of social conceptions of gender. For Solís y Martínez, this working of gender was most evident in the home: “Quite simply, my mother's departure from her traditional role as homemaker undermined my father's masculinity... It was perhaps the loss of total control over my mother that most undermined my father's masculine power.”¹⁰ Due to the fact that Solís y Martínez's mother had to integrate herself into the workforce, it made his father more difficult to be able to define her as a woman, and therefore, himself as a man. Because the ‘lesbian woman’ has no actual or theoretical male husband¹¹ to define herself in relation to, even when lesbians do identify as women, they exist in a nonnormative space of womanhood, by the nature of their failure to be heterosexual and serve a male partner.

¹⁰Solís y Martínez, Daniel E. “Mestiza/o Gender: Notes towards a Transformative Masculinity,” (Routledge, 2013), 408.

¹¹ I specify “male husband” since I am working in conversation with a text like *Latina Longings*, one that emphasizes the fact that words typically ascribed to men can also be ascribed to people of other genders. I have seen many queer people refer to themselves or their partners as “husbands,” despite the fact that neither of them identify as men; therefore, I am hoping that specificity like this can work to trouble norms, despite working within them.

Lesbian Language and Theory

Through explanation of how social understandings of lesbianism are constructed, I now arrive at the reason why I am problematizing the language around lesbianism within theory: even as theorists attempt to become more inclusive, they still end up resorting to language that emphasizes the site of origin for lesbian sexuality as “the female body.” It does not make sense to base our analyses of sexuality solely on the idea that lesbians are always already cisgender women, because by doing so, scholars risk alienating trans people, especially those who already feel othered by social conceptions of womanhood and gender. Although she emphasizes needing to analyze the intersection between sex and gender, Juana María Rodríguez uses language such as “female-bodied people” and “female-presenting people” throughout her book, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*¹². This language reinforces implications of “gender” being social, while “sex” is what you really are, also neglecting canonical feminist theories by Judith Butler who claims that both sex *and* gender are constructed. This language also implies that having breasts and a vagina makes one “female bodied,” unintentionally arriving at a kind of gender essentialism: while “female-presenting” is more inclusive, “female-bodied” insinuates that regardless of the gender you identify with—whether you are a transman that hasn’t had or doesn’t want surgeries or you are genderqueer—your anatomy makes your body “female.” Language such as “female presenting” or “feminine presenting” (the latter being commonly used among left-leaning individuals) places the burden of gendered association upon the individual rather than society. For example, even though I typically wear men’s clothes

¹²Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures*. New York University Press, 2014. 14

and have a gender-neutral haircut, due to factors out of my control, I will generally be perceived as a woman. By previous logic, I would be identified as “female presenting” or “feminine presenting” despite the fact that I do not *actually present femininely*—this sort of language makes it my fault that I am perceived as a woman, despite the fact even though what people think a woman looks like is entirely out of my control. Although I use *Latina Longings* as my example, many other texts replicate this same type of language as “an act of expropriation or appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to ‘male’ and ‘feminine’ belongs to ‘female.’”¹³ This type of language ignores the long history of the nonnormative gender of lesbians, and of masculine lesbians as well. Despite faults in her language, I feel that Rodríguez has a particularly interesting way of showing lesbianism’s deviant gender space, although she does not necessarily synthesize it in a way that I find constructive. She goes on to describe an imagined sexual encounter in which “the femme scans her eyes downward” and “the butch grabs his cock,” demonstrating the ways in which the lesbians in this scenario occupy a nonnormative space of womanhood. Before describing this encounter, she prefaces that she will use “male pronouns” and assign “masculine physical attributes” to butch bodies, asserting that this may “unnerve some readers and further complicate the space between normative and nonnormative genders and sexuality.” She asks us to trust this usage and use it to “reveal our cultural attachments to masculinities and femininities.”¹⁴ My problem with this is not that she ascribes he and him, masculinity, or “cocks” to butches—the issue lies instead in the assumption that all of these things are inherently male and again, that, “gender is the rightful property of

¹³Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” Routledge, 1991. 955.

¹⁴ Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures*. New York University Press, 2014. 120-121.

sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to ‘male’.” These assumptions treat “the body as a legible text”¹⁵ and do not allow for the messiness of queerness and gender to fully permeate our conceptions of them. *Queering the Color Line* shows how these identities are constructed, and though the language of the Rodríguez does not inherently call back to the racism of the language, it does not allow for the deconstruction of these categories in a useful way—although we have to exist in a balance between dismantling such structures and living within them, this language is not part of the balance; it unintentionally reinforces the scientifically racist place that is the origin of determining what a “female body” looks like; it does not work to analyze the place that this language this comes from.

Though cisgender lesbian women obviously exist, in many ways, I am arguing that lesbianism oftentimes exists and has existed in its own spaces of gender. Solís y Martínez articulates a somewhat similar case for queer men: “This in-between homosexual gender is centered on the matter of penetration: he who is penetrated is a homosexual. By being the receptive partner in anal intercourse... they enter into a gender space that borrows and claims much from femininity but that is decidedly different from woman-ness.”¹⁶ Although I am not arguing for a semi-problematic articulation of gender where your gender is dictated based on your actions, I think it is noteworthy that there are historied instances where sexuality creates a separate space of gender, especially due to the fact that Solís y Martínez uses notions like these in his move to disidentify with Latine conceptions of gender and sexuality, along with

¹⁵ Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” Duke University Press Durham and London, 2000. 23.

¹⁶ Solís y Martínez, Daniel E. “Mestiza/o Gender: Notes towards a Transformative Masculinity,” (Routledge, 2013), 407.

American traditions of sexuality to create his own Mestizo/a gender that includes both gender and sexuality. Based on the historical precedent I have laid out, reassessment of the language around lesbianism is necessary rather than disidentification.

An interesting move toward the type of identification I am interested in occurs in the *Trans Studies Quarterly* term “Transbutch” by Jen Manion. Manion states, “Transbutch marks a liminal space that embraces both the historical legacies of the category of butch and the more expansive possibilities created by the transgender rights movement for recognition, community, and empowerment.” They articulate that the term transbutch was created in response to TERFs or Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (who are typically lesbians) “[mourning] the alleged loss of the butch,” and defending “boundaries of their “woman identified woman” communities.”¹⁷ With regard to identity, “[t]ransbutches embrace aspects of masculinity without denouncing their social affiliation with an oppressed group of people who were predominantly raised and socialized as girls.”¹⁸ Despite acknowledging the transbutch relation to lesbianism, the article then goes on to distance the term from a lesbian identity by stating that transbutches are generally related to transmen in their gender presentation and makes no further mention of sexuality. As much as queer theory treats gender as essentialized, this passage seems to mark an inversion of that, subtly rejecting sexuality as relating to gender, refusing to articulate the term “transbutch” as related to lesbianism beyond its origin from transphobic discourse, despite butch’s very clear connection to non-transphobic lesbianism.

¹⁷ I note that these lesbians are TERFs even though the article does not because “women identified women” is a common TERF dogwhistle.

¹⁸ Manion, Jen. “Transbutch” in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 230. Duke University Press, 2014.

Conclusion – Queering Language of Lesbianism

One of the main reasons that I used Somerville’s text to articulate the ways that race, sexuality, and gender are intertwined is due to the conception that despite its Western origin, terms such as “queer” are more appropriate to use globally because of its many functions and definitions compared to words like “gay” and “lesbian,” which, as I have demonstrated, have been used relatively narrowly. Further, the neoliberal definitions of gay and lesbian that have become ubiquitously used often center around white, middle class gays in the United States. However, by refusing to use lesbian in a larger context than that of the US due to its association with middle class white people, we erase the long history that lesbianism has had with relation to women and people of color. With a more expanded definition, I hope that we can push back on universalizing and essentializing definitions of lesbianism in order to make it more appropriate for global usage. I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting that as a person in a Western location that we should *force* this definition on queer people who may fit into it, but rather, that by widening its definition, it can become more appropriate for global usage—especially for people in countries whose languages do not have words like “queer,” “gay,” “lesbian,” or any other marker of social identity that may want or need them due to the ways that colonialism and globalization have changed their social understandings of gender and sexuality. Despite heavily critiquing Rodríguez, I think she does important work on emphasizing that we cannot “pretend that we can exist outside [the] regulatory power” of institutions such as gender, sexuality, and race. By acknowledging the notion that we must strive for a balance between dismantling such structures and living within them, I hope that we are able to strive toward a more queer conception of lesbianism.

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