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What's in a woman? Identity and Community on American lesbian lands

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Correction notice

The initially published version of this article includes a number of details about the otherwise anonymized participants. Upon revaluation, the participants feared these elements could put their anonymity at risk, and requested corrections to be made to the article to safeguard their privacy. Hence, certain elements of the article were corrected. Throughout the document, all details marked by the participants as potentially identifying information have been edited to further anonymize the community studied, and several line edits have been made to clarify the author's descriptive intent. No further changes have been made to the article, and neither its substance nor its conclusions have been altered. The full correction notice can be accessed via: https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.90341

Abstract

In the 1970s, in the wake of the Women's liberation movement and the hippie back-to-the land movement, some women bought plots of land all over the United States and founded what they called 'lesbian lands', i.e. women-only separatist communities. Some of them continue to exist today, and are still inhabited by self-called 'landykes.' Based on in-person semi-directed interviews conducted in November 2021 and August 2022 with nine women living or having lived on lesbian lands in the same geographical area, this paper investigates their definition of 'woman' and how it circumscribes the limits of their community. This paper first argues for a nuanced revision of what radical lesbianism means in these rural lesbian separatist spaces and then proceeds to demonstrate how 'woman' has become resignified over the years, *de facto* barring trans women and challenging lesbian- identified trans men's place within their community.

Keywords

Lesbian lands, Community, Lesbian feminism, Lesbian separatism, Women's space, Trans

Introduction

In the wake of the Women's liberation movement and the hippie back-to-the land movement, dozens of women bought plots of land all over the United States and founded what they called 'lesbian lands[1]', on which they settled to live and develop their own culture away from men's stifling grip. Within these women-only separatist communities, they built individual cabins and collective infrastructure where they could discuss, celebrate, tend the land, make art and make love[2]. This 'Lesbian Nation[3]' reached its peak in the 1980s and has gradually diminished in numbers since then. Nonetheless, some lesbian lands continue to exist today, and I went to visit seven of them that are still inhabited by about twenty self- called 'landykes.'

I first visited these lands – which are part of a larger community of lands in the same geographical area - in Fall 2021 with my ex-partner who identified as non-binary, trans and AFAB[4]. Though I was there to do interviews on completely unrelated topics for my dissertation, their presence spurred many political and intimate conversations about trans people. This fieldwork experience led to the partial reorientation of my research as I started investigating the processes of community-making and group-based identity formation that have taken place on these lesbian lands: what common set of qualities and ideas have been established for members to recognize others as part of the same community? What patterns of belonging and othering has this inevitably entailed? What boundaries have been deemed necessary? And for the purpose of this article specifically: to what extent are these boundaries permeable for trans people?

To answer some of these questions, I went back to Southern Oregon almost a year later to interview nine women from four different lands. I asked them systematically about their definitions of woman and lesbian as well as what similarities and differences they saw between queer women and lesbians, between trans men and butch lesbians, between trans women and lesbians. This conversation was informed by my own positionality as a thirty-one-year-old, white, cis lesbian woman: my age in particular prompted some distrust on some of the participants' part, as it made me likely to adhere to what some of them called the 'queer/trans/gender ideology,' a set of beliefs that they associated with misogyny and lesbophobia. All the interviews felt thus emotionally-loaded, at times tense and assertive, at times vulnerable and reflexive. To protect what the participants have shared with me, I have replaced their names with a randomly assigned initial, followed by an asterisk. Though several of my interviewees could be identified as important figures, their opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the bigger landyke community.

The resulting one- to two-hour-long interviews helped me circumscribe the limits of their community by clarifying who – and more particularly what bodies – could or could not access it and how these delimitations de facto barred certain trans people from living there. This paper thus investigates what 'woman' is on lesbian lands, how the category can be subjected to resignification and how this has impacted my interviewees' sense of self and

[1] The name varies between 'women's lands' and 'lesbian lands.' I opted for 'lesbian lands' to counter the euphemistic tendency that was at play in the initial use of 'women' in 'women's lands' and to account for the material reality of these lands which are nowadays exclusively peopled by lesbians.

[2] Current scholarship on the history of lesbian lands includes: Shugar, D. R. (1995). *Separatism and Women's Community*. University of Nebraska Press; Valentine, G. (1996). Making Space: Lesbian Separatist Communities in the United States. In P. A. B. Clarke & J. Little (Eds.), *Contested Countryside Cultures: Rurality and Socio-Cultural Marginalisation*. Routledge; Summerhawk, B., & Gagehabib, L. V. (2000). *Circles of Power: Issues and Identities in a Lesbian Community*. New Victoria Publishers; Flamant, F. (2015). *Women's lands: Construction d'une utopie: Oregon, USA, 1970-2010*. Editions IXe; Luis, K. N. (2018). *Herlands: Exploring the Women's Land Movement in the United States*. University of Minnesota Press. Miller, T. (2019*). Communes in America, 1975-2000.* Syracuse University Press.

[3] Johnston, J. (1973). *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*. Simon & Schuster.

[4] Assigned Female at Birth. This person also used 'they/them' pronouns.

community. I first identify the discursive foundations of the feminist and lesbian debate around trans issues and challenge the common notion that radical lesbianism and constructionism automatically go together[5]. For my interviewees, 'woman' is a totalizing, holistic experience grounded in the female and lesbian body, which precludes trans women from ever being part of this category. This biological bedrock also shapes the way trans men are perceived but their entry in the community remains conditional: while their presence can be the object of resistance, their absence is also the object of angst and mourning and leads some landykes to actively open their land to detransitioned women.

How the conversation started

Discursive foundations

Though the question of trans inclusion and trans exclusion on lesbian lands has been broached by scholars like Keridwen N. Luis (2018) and Mary Gently (2019), there is still much to do to document the landykes' evolving opinions, particularly as they do not form a homogenous group. Most of my formal interviewees were in their late sixties; one of them was in her eighties. All of them identified as lesbians. One of them - F* - was a trans man for 30 years before detransitioning; the rest always identified as women. Finally, all of them identified or passed as White[6], with one of them mentioning her Jewish upbringing in passing.

If their positionality varies, most of them have been profoundly influenced by lesbian feminism and lesbian separatism, either because they came out as political lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s or because they joined the community later on and adopted the main discourse over the years. Lesbian feminism centers a "woman-identified" experience, that is a perspective and a relationality to the world that favors women – or wimmin/womyn as they like to say – over men and feminine-associated values (such as empathy, sharing, creativity) over masculine-associated values (violence, domination, utilitarianism). Influenced by American cultural feminism and French differentialist feminism[7], lesbian feminism tends to consider lesbianism as the ultimate outcome for feminism. As such, lesbian feminists often view lesbianism as a political choice and as a way to reject the patriarchal expectations placed on women in heterosexual relationships. Lesbian separatism centers lesbian primacy even more and not only refuses any collaboration with men (or boy children for that matter[8]), but also somtimes with straight or bisexual women who are accused of catering to men's needs first and sleeping with their oppressors. Lesbian separatists encourage women to separate

[5] Dworkin, Andrea. (1974). *Woman Hating*. Plume; Wittig, Monique. (1992). *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Beacon Press.

[6] This is consistent with the majority of landykes living in the area I studied, though one of the historical lands is now inhabited by two Indigenous women who are working towards making it a women of color place. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview them for this article and only have notes of our informal two-hour long conversation. Their opinion as younger women and women of color is however crucial and will be the object of further research later on.

[7] French differentialist feminism and American cultural feminism actively interacted over the years. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous – two major French theorists of differentialist feminism – were widely read in the United States, so much so that their ideas became known as "French feminism" in American colleges. Both trends are similar in many aspects – in their belief that woman pre-exists any patriarchal conception of 'woman' or in their celebration of woman's body which in turn nourishes woman's creativity – but they also each have local particularities among which are the predominance of psychoanalysis and woman's language in France or the reclaiming of a 'herstory' of historically neglected foremothers and female mythical figures and the development of a Wiccan spirituality in the U.S.

[8] The presence of boy children on lesbian lands was a major controversy throughout the 1970s and 1980s: male socialization was considered too hard to overcome and in anyway, this could not be achieved in one generation of lesbian mothers who had grown up in a sexist, male-favoring society. Each land had its own policy regarding the maximum age up until which boy children could be welcome.

from the ma(i)n culture in order to develop their fullest and most political selves away from men's oppression.

While academia has usually labeled this type of feminism 'cultural[9]', I argue that it is very much perceived as radical by lesbian feminists themselves, including my interviewees. Language thus becomes confusing as different groups of feminists from sometimes different countries use the same word to refer to different things[10]. Several of my interviewees identified as radical lesbians, political lesbians, lesbian separatists, 'dykes', and/or 'dyke separatists'[11]; and their form of lesbianism has always been about *women* radically celebrating their love for *women*: uprooting themselves from a men's world[12], they created and furnished their own alternative reality with various female figurines and female-associated symbols. As I walked upon their beautiful lands, I was met with the voluptuous shape of a plaster goddess guarding the entrance; a striking vulva-shaped theatrical costume; a fastidiously crafted lesbian dollhouse; exhilarating multitudes of naked women in photographs, paintings and sculptures. For my interviewees, female bodies are and have always been constitutive of what makes up women: having a vulva, breasts, periods – and more recently, XX chromosomes and/or ovaries – are the sexual denominators that determine who is a woman and who is not. These criteria have shaped the conversation around trans people from the start.

From womyn-only to womyn-born womyn only

The initial conversation about the presence of trans people – and particularly trans women – in women-only spaces is usually traced back to two events: first, the expulsion of trans woman Beth Elliott from the lesbian civil rights organization Daughters of Bilitis in 1972 and the following controversy over her participation in 1973 in the West Coast Lesbian Conference in Los Angeles, which led lesbian feminist keynote speaker Robin Morgan to publicly take a stand against 'transvestite or transsexual males[13].' Second, the publication of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), under the supervision of self-styled 'radical lesbian feminist' scholar Mary Daly, and the subsequent

[9] For example, see Alice Echols' comparative work (1989) where she describes lesbian feminist political ideas as having been influenced by late 1960s and early 1970s radical feminism, but in reality, being much more aligned with mid-1970s and 1980s cultural feminism. She then operates a classification between radical and cultural feminism: 'Radical feminism was a political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system whereas cultural feminism was a countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female.' (6)

[10] Even though Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig's theories are very popular in French feminism, none of my interviewees were familiar with their respective reframing of lesbianism, sex and gender. In this context, the often-noted paradox between a radical feminism that originally was constructionist and has now become essentialist is not viable because for many American radical feminists, it was never (just) constructionist in the first place. Adrienne Rich or Mary Daly, for example, both called themselves 'radical' while advocating for a female or lesbian 'essence' in Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs*, 5 (4), 631-660 and Daly, M. (1978). *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Beacon Press.

[11] This abundance of identities mirrors the political effervescence of the 1970s and 1980s. A complete history and comparison of these various movements would extend well beyond the scope of this article but a very useful overview of radical, cultural and lesbian feminism can be found in Echols, A. (1989). *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America: 1967-75*. University of Minnesota Press. Other informative work includes: Morgan, R. (1970). *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Vintage Books; Jo, B., Strega, L., & Ruston. (1990). *Dykes-Loving-Dykes: Dyke Separatist Politics for Lesbians Only*. Battleaxe; Hoagland, S. L., & Penelope, J. (Eds.). (1991). *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*. Onlywomen Press.

[12] Their insularity was such that, in 1985, some of them had never heard of Bob Marley and reggae music! (A*'s interview)

[13] Morgan, R. (1970). Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape. In *Sisterhood is Powerful* (pp. 152-158). Vintage.

harassment and resignation of employee and trans woman Sandy Stone[14] from lesbian feminist company Olivia Records to which Stone responded in 1991[15]. Yet the debate remained mostly within urban lesbian feminist circles until 1992 when an altercation with trans woman Nancy Jean Burkholder prompted the iconic Michigan Womyn's Festival to state that only "womyn-born womyn" could enter its premises. According to A*, who has lived on lesbian lands for more than forty years:

> 'They [trans women] did it in a very disrespectful way. Like women have said, I'm sure there were trans women in Michigan and we didn't know about it, because they were respectful. But I think this one person wanted to make a statement. And so they came on to Michigan and showed their penis. Walked around with their penis showing and were escorted off[16]. And that was the beginning of this whole thing. And it was difficult. And it continues to be difficult.'

By centering the debate around 'respect', A* asserts the rules and the boundaries of her community that needed to be reinforced under the threat of what was perceived as an external invasion. The Michigan Womyn's Festival (or Michfest) was a deeply loved haven[17]: since its founding in 1976, every year for a week, it had offered shelter to many women whose bodies and sexualities badly needed to feel safe. This need only increased with the rise of the Religious Right during the Reagan era, which led to an unprecedented backlash against women's and lesbians' rights. Many festival participants were abuse survivors[18] and the trans woman's presupposed aggressive intentionality ('I think this one person wanted to make a statement') was read as again another iteration that people with penises *ergo* were men *ergo* could be rapists. This synecdochical thinking (penises = men = potential rape and abuse) is characteristic of early lesbian separatism[19] and has been used at times to justify why penis-owners could not access women-only spaces, such as Michfest.

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[14] Conversations on trans people have usually revolved around sex and not sexual orientation since, for Robin Morgan, Mary Daly, or my interviewees, to be a lesbian is to be a woman first, thus always coming back to what 'woman' means.

[15] Stone, S. (1991). The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto. In K. Straub & J. Epstein (Eds.), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*. Routledge.

[16] What seems to be a slightly different version of the same event is related in Tea, M. (2003). Transmissions from Camp Trans. *The Believer*. [Website], in which she and some trans people – including Nancy Burkholder and Julia Serano – tell of their experiences at Camp Trans, the annual protest camp that was set up against the Michigan Womyn's Festival's policies on trans women. According to Simon, one of the people interviewed: 'Tony […] identified as a post-op trans man, with bottom surgery. He was saying that his dick was made out of the skin on his arm […]. He said, "Hey, if my trans women friends are still men because they were assigned male at birth, then I must still be a woman." So he went into the fest and took a shower. He asked consent of the women showering, telling them what kind of body he had. They said OK, but because the showers were public, new folks came in and freaked. By the time the ticket-buying action happened the next morning, the rumor was that something like six non-op trans women flashed their erect penises at the girl's camp.' (Tea, 2003)

[17] Morris, B. J. (1999). *Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals.* Alyson Books.

[18] In 1991, after years of lobbying done by the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund (NOW LDEF) to persuade Congress to legislate federal protections for women, Delaware Senator Joe Biden released a report showing that the number of rapes in the U.S. had increased by 6% in 1990, going from 94,504 women in 1989 to 100,433 in 1990. This report served as a basis to pass the Violence Against Women Act in 1994.

[19] Examples of such early lesbian separatist thought can be found in the 1973 Gutter Dyke Collective's manifest ('Just as sexism is the source of all of our other oppressions, maleness is the source of sexism. In order to rid the world of sexism we must first rid the world of men.', in Hoagland, 1991, 30) or in the 1990 book *Dykes-Loving-Dykes: Dyke Separatist Politics for Lesbians Only* ('Rape is literally marking and expanding territory. [...] Males everywhere are waging a physical and psychological war against all females that can only be described as gynocide.', Jo, B., Strega, L., & Ruston, 59)

For trans women to be respectful of the rules of MichFest, they would thus have needed to be very discrete about their lack of *natural* female genitalia in order to better assimilate: according to Davina Anne Gabriel, then the editor of *TransSisters: the Journal of Transsexual Feminism*, the first initial protest of the festival's policy by trans people endorsed this strategy as it tried 'to persuade the organizers to change the festival policy to allow postoperative – but not preoperative – male-to-female transsexuals to attend[20].' (Koyama, 2020, 735) According to a survey conducted in 1992, the demand would have been met by seventy-two percent of the festival participants (Tea, 2003) and can be understood as an example of respectability politics. As members of a marginalized community, these first trans women activists consciously tried to gain the respect and conform to the codes of the more dominant women group, albeit a very relatively dominant one but one that had had the means to form an autonomous and safe space.

After 1992, these trying relationships and the reflections they inevitably triggered started playing out elsewhere in the country, percolating from the cities – another hub of lesbian (and queer) culture – to the most rural lesbian lands. B*, who bought her land in the 1990s, recalls when she first had to take a stand regarding trans women:

> 'Oh, it started in the nineties. […] I remember we went to a gathering and there was a woman from Portland and she put us through an exercise about how comfortable we would feel with trans women and stuff. […] And this would have happened in the late nineties because Portland was a pretty hot spot for the whole trans community. […]. It was a circle thing where she was in the middle and she was like, 'Make the distance as to how you would feel about trans women being part of this circle.' And I think 90% of the lesbians […] went to the edges of the circle.'

While some historical landykes were resistant to trans people's budding claims to be included in women's spaces, later landykes came to this question with a slightly different outlook. Around the same time, F* – who then identified as a trans butch – was picketing in front of her city's City Hall to 'get the T in the LGB' umbrella term along with her friend Andrea, who was a trans woman. Though F*'s opinion about trans women is not as straightforward as to consider all trans women women, it is nonetheless inflected by her past experience in trans milieux and offers one counterpoint to the more dominant discourse on the lands that stemmed from rare-to-no direct encounters with trans women.

What makes a woman a woman

A totalizing experience: Woman and the body

For the women I interviewed, sex[21] cuts across every other oppression like race, class or ability, resulting in a collectively shared experience amongst all women. The degrees to which the social and the political are defining features of 'womanness' differ but for all of them, their sense of being a woman is above all grounded in a biological sex that cannot be

[20] This demand quickly evolved with the creation of Camp Trans in 1994 which called for the inclusion of every trans woman into Mich Fest. Tensions escalated dividing lesbians and feminists along pro and anti-trans lines, both onsite and online, and Mich Fest land owner Lise Vogel ended up closing the festival down in 2015.

[21] I use this word on purpose as it was used by feminist and lesbian theorists of the time. It is to be understood as both a biological category and as a social system that divides and creates a hierarchy between women and men. The word 'gender' was mostly used to talk about gender roles although some of my interviewees have started using it today in its more common acceptation, that is as a 'person's internal sense of being male, female, some combination of male and female, or neither male nor female.' (Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Gender. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved October 9, 2023, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender)

ignored and the body is the recurring matricial site of any attempts at defining what woman is:

> 'My own definition [of a woman] is based on biological sex, and it has to do not just with external genitalia, but with having a uterus and ovaries and those kinds of things. Like I would define a man as a person who has a penis and testes and, you know, male gonads. So that's where I'm coming from about that.' (C*)

And:

> 'Definitely being born without a penis is the first priority. And then growing up as a woman, being able to bleed, knowing what it feels like to sneeze and feel your tampon come out half an inch. […] Women are just more oppressed. Oppression is part of the definition of being a woman. […] It's a different experience. Being without a penis, bleeding, going through society as a young girl, growing into a woman, having a less paying job no matter what you do, unless you start doing male work, which is what I did.' (B*)

This leaves relatively little space to women whose bodies do not fit the requirements[22]. While some of my interviewees acknowledge that trans women are women, it remains the case that for most of them, the differences between their own experiences and the experiences of trans women are too irreconcilable to accept them into their community. Rather, they urge trans women to create their own communities, an argument that originated in the 1990s debates at Michfest[23]:

> 'I wish [trans people] would fight [their battles] in a way that is like creating their own culture and creating their own space, rather than saying, You should let me into your space.' (Q*)

In my interviewees' eyes, each group must have its own exclusive space because sex – both as an oppressive system and as a group of sexual organs – is the one thing that unites women together, an experience that trans women never had and never will have access to *in its totality*. Bottom and top surgeries are thus not enough to make one a woman and most of my interviewees now identify woman as originating *within* the body, on the micro-level of genes and chromosomes. Since it cannot realistically be verified, being a woman has become an unseen and unalterable quality that necessitates a whole network of communication and trust for landykes to let anyone into their community. F*, for example, whose body bears the trace of 30 years of testosterone injections, had to be vouched for by several women in order to purchase one of the historical lands in 2019:

> 'And it was a little difficult personally because of my… particular dilemma so I had to really be on guard. And I had to be successful. I knew that it was that important because there were separatists. […] G* [her girlfriend] was a gain, she was actually my validation that my story was true. That I'm not trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes, I'm not trying to make myself what I'm not. It's lesbian land and they were responsible for making sure that the person that took the reins was actually

[22] This view also challenges the place of intersex women. On one occasion in July 2023, during my third field trip, this limitation was pointed out by members of the community while C* was reading the draft of a text she had written which made clear that having ovaries and XX chromosomes were defining features of women. She later amended her text to acknowledge 'the small percentage of women who didn't have them.'

[23] Tea, 2003.

> womyn-born womyn who are calling themselves lesbian. I had a big challenge ahead of me.' (F*)

Feeling her situation to be unique amongst women who have prided themselves on being women for decades, F* is reluctant to voice what she sees as a shameful abandoning of her sex and resorts to a euphemistic description of her past life as a trans man ('my particular dilemma'). By contrast, she was very vocal in describing the lesbian dynamics of her couple, regularly referring to herself as butch and to her girlfriend, G*, as fem – regardless of the fact that G* also has short hair, is very muscular and is able to chop wood and build entire cabins with her bare hands. In our conversation, F* expressed her discomfort in identifying as a woman, an identity that has to be asserted when living on lesbian lands. She thus does so by closely articulating woman to lesbian.

Woman is lesbian is woman

Both G* and F* evoke how the category of 'woman' can feel constricting, sexualizing, and dangerous in the heterosexual world: 'I feel the word "woman" in a group of heterosexual males makes me a target.' (F*) For F* in particular, 'woman' is only viable if it is immediately associated to 'lesbian', both as an operating and life-saving category:

> 'I don't think that I became lesbian because I didn't want to be a girl. But when somebody referred to me as anything female, I wanted it to be as a lesbian. Because lesbian means in my mind, in my world, lesbian meant female-bodied woman or female-bodied person.' (F*)

And:

> 'Who was not under the thumb of a man.' (G*)

A similar logic also motivated the creation of words such as 'womyn,' 'wimmin' or 'we'moon,' which have been very much in vogue in lesbian feminist circles since the 1970s. In B*'s words, 'In "woman" for some reason, and "women," there's always a "man" and "men." And the whole point of being a lesbian was that there wasn't a "man" or "men." So we used a Y.' 'Womyn' – like other lesbian feminist neologisms[24] – was one attempt at derailing language from its usual heterosexual, androcentric route, by offering a terminology in which sex and sexual orientation could become one, thus birthing a new category of beings liberated from 'the thumb of man.'

In this context, it seems to me that 'woman' is not just about biology or that, at least, biology does not encompass the totality of what my interviewees mean when they use the word 'woman.' It is clear that they also define 'woman' in opposition to the social system of patriarchy and heterosexuality. This dialectical relationship comes up again and again in lesbian separatist texts from the 1970s to the 1990s but the focus has now shifted and female biology is no longer only used to define women in opposition to cis men but also sometimes *in opposition to trans women*. Some of my interviewees see men and trans women as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and so for them, their fight has not changed and remains against patriarchy. Yet their way of fighting at least is slightly different: by zooming in on female genes and chromosomes, they have rigidified what a woman's body is supposed to be like. By making the female body the all defining feature, they have turned it into a body politic whose physical components function as gatekeepers to encompass and delimit the community. F*'s initiation rite exemplifies this logic by ensuring that the community not

[24] Other non-exhaustive examples include: "ovulars" instead of "seminars", "herstory" for "history", "womanaging" for "managing", "womanure" for "manure", "moonstruation" for "menstruation" (Archibald, 2021).

only is a safe space for women but a space of safe women too. This hand-picked selection is reminiscent of older scenarios of self-protection and exclusion that played out in the early years of the lesbian feminism, pitting straight women against lesbians and pre-Women's lib lesbians against 'new' political lesbians[25] which led to at times behavioral policing and hierarchizing of lesbian sexualities and identities. As such, the distrust expressed towards trans women can be understood as another iteration of an older desire to safeguard a specific vision of what woman and women's spaces are. The dedication to 'woman's' bodies – both physical and political – as a pre-requisite to claim the categories of both woman and lesbian thus not only automatically bars trans women from accessing the certain lesbian lands but also questions the welcoming of trans men there.

Of dykes and men: The rise of trans men and the disappearance of the butch

The traitors

The question of trans men, transmasc and non-binary people is indeed a divisive one on lesbian lands, though admittedly less so than the inclusion of trans women. The paramount importance of 'woman's' genitalia usually leads my interviewees to consider trans men as 'womyn-born' and grants them access to the lands. However, for some, trans men are seen as having abandoned the politically-loaded category of 'woman' and 'lesbian' to join the oppressor's group. One of my interviewees, K* used to date a trans man named Ma* whom she broke up with because she could not handle being read as straight. She harshly criticizes trans men meddling with what she sees as lesbian affairs:

> 'He wrote an article […] where he's basically looking over our shoulder and telling us as lesbians that we need to invite trans women into our midst because trans women are women. I was mad. I was so mad. I'm like, You are a man and you're going to tell lesbians how to run their space, fuck you. You gave up your card. You don't get a vote. You can't tell us what to do.' (K*)

Because trans men are now benefiting from male privileges, they can no longer fairly claim the right to be in lesbian spaces and identify as lesbians. According to B*:

> 'Ha*'s sister did that […] where she was a man but if there was a lesbian event, then she was a lesbian. And Ha* got pissed at her and said, You pick one. You only are what you are when it's convenient. I don't think I ascribe to that. […] It's like if you're going to call yourself a man and you want all the privileges of a man, but we're putting on a good dyke event, now you want to be a dyke? You know, it's like you-want-your-cake-and-eat-it-too kind of game.' (B*)

The apparent inequality of treatment between trans women – who are never perceived as women because they don't have what it takes *biologically* – and trans men – who are sometimes treated as men because they are *socially* read as such and benefit from such passing in the bigger heterosexual culture – must be taken with a grain of salt. In most cases, trans men are not seen as men; rather they are held responsible for the choices they made and thus see the access to their former lesbian community sometimes refused. However, their access is never entirely closed off: trans men's enculturation as women and the female sexual characteristics they still possess – no matter the surgery they might have

[25] Other less overt patterns of exclusion also took place between lower-class vs. middle-class lesbians, lesbians of color vs. white lesbians, disabled vs. able-bodied. Some of them have been analyzed in Deevy, S., Kaufer, N., Wagner, D., Miracle, B., & Osmer-Newhouse, C. (1976). *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective*. WomanShare Books; Paz, J. M. (1980). *The La Luz Journal*. Paz Press; Summerhawk, B., & Gagehabib, L. V. (2000). *Circles of Power: Issues and Identities in a Lesbian Community*. New Victoria Publishers.

done since womanhood is now situated *inside* the body – mark them as in-between figures in the community. Most of my interviewees also know at least one trans man on a personal level – a former lover, a friend or an important figure of their community who has transitioned – and this interpersonal dimension colors the way they are able to conceptualize trans men. This ambivalence towards trans men is apparent in my interviewees' discourse towards them and the feelings they express range from anger to sadness:

> 'There are a couple of women who have been a part of this community who've gone that direction. Like it breaks my heart that someone would choose to live as a man, and even to go through the biological transformations. It's just misogyny at its most fierce inside of my world. […] There's a woman who had been close here, had come to circles. We flirted. […] And somewhere along the way, she changed her perspective and did whatever… I don't know whether she had surgery or not, but she then lived as a man, became a man and just… It broke my heart. Because you're leaving the commitment, the community, the drive to be inside of a woman-defined, woman-centered place.' (C*)

This person's transition clearly hit both a personal and a political nerve because C* understands it as a rejection of a community that she has helped found and maintain over the years. Her distinct feeling of betrayal is doubly reinforced by the affective relationship she had developed with that person which was based on the premises of a *woman* flirting with another *woman*. Affect plays an important part in some of my interviewees' responses to trans men because trans men are often seen as women who have failed the community and have reneged on the essential tenet that every relationship created on lesbian land rests upon: common womanhood. Yet another way of looking at it is to wonder to what extent some trans men were also failed by the community. The limits that were established to protect lesbian lands can also be interpreted as limitations: by antagonizing trans men as opportunistic traitors, some of my interviewees thus avoid addressing the needs of their lesbian-identified peers who might want to remain in a culture that still feels like home to them and whose protection they might still cherish.

Besides, having access to a community of women is also a privilege that not everyone has. F* clearly explained to me the reasons that motivated her decision forty years ago:

> 'I did not transition because I wanted to be a man. […] Or even felt like one. There are a bazillion lesbian women that I have met over the years that didn't choose the path I chose to get through life. I did it because of my own personal safety. I did it because I wanted to fly under the radar. […] I had to have an apartment and a job. And I was so butch that I couldn't find a job. I couldn't find an apartment. I got kicked out of apartments. I got denied jobs because I was too butch. […] So I didn't do it for all the other reasons that everyone else did. And it seriously got me in trouble in the trans community.' (F*)

F*'s experience of oppression is strikingly similar to another very famous trans butch, Leslie Feinberg, whose *Stone Butch Blues* 'struck a major chord' with her. F* saw herself represented in this cult classic autofiction, which relates the hardships of Jess Goldberg, a butch lesbian living in Buffalo, N.Y. in the 1950s who is repeatedly harassed and abused by her employers and the police and transitions to protect herself. Yet taking testosterone does not solve Jess' permanent feeling of gender confusion and, mourning the loss of her lesbian identity and community, she ends up detransitioning. What's striking in both Jess and F*'s stories is how both of them felt out of place in the trans and the lesbian community. F* was treated accordingly by the two groups when she posted a personal in Craigslist in the 2010s:

> 'When I had those personal ads out there, I had three different versions. I started out very naively trying to be authentic. My ad said, "I'm an old-school lesbian who identifies currently as a trans person." That got me in trouble. That got me some nasty, nasty emails, that got me women sending me emails saying, "How dare you take my femme from me?" You know, like I was raiding the chicken house or something by transitioning. So I had to change it up because I wasn't getting [laughs] very good response. All I was getting was hate mail. [...] I was putting it in different categories. I put it in...' (F*)
>
> '*Women seeking women?*' (G*)
>
> 'No, it was actually "Men Seeking Women". I put it in there and I explained myself that, 'No, I'm not a man, really. I'm a trans person.' And I used the 'I like camping and I like...', the typical stuff that people put in a personal and it got me in trouble. So I changed that up and put it in "Women Seeking Women". I also put it in "Casual Encounters" at one point with different words. 'Trans butch looking for a special woman' was the final version.' (F*)

The harassing F* was subjected to reveals the difficulty any community can have when confronted to people whose existence challenges its boundaries. Both trans butch Leslie Feinberg and trans man Patrick Califia have highlighted how this reaction from some lesbians seems to ignore 'the community's long history of tolerance for "passing women," women who cross-dress as men, and butches whose identity is sometimes male, sometimes female' (Califia, 1997, 100). Yet this 'ignorance' can be traced back historically to the 1970s and 1980s when lesbian feminists came out and entirely dismissed their 1950s butch and femme predecessors for reinforcing binary gender roles. As Joan Nestle (1992) relates in her femme-butch reader, the same accusations were levied against butch-femme couples as they are nowadays against trans men:

> 'Everyone has taken a turn at denigrating the butch-femme couple – from the sexologist at the turn of the century […] to the lesbian-feminists of the seventies who cried 'traitor' into the faces of the few butch-femme couples who did cross over into the new world of cultural feminism.' (14)

Though the women built their lesbian identities partly in reaction against this decried duo, one can now observe a return to the binary femme/butch dynamic within their community. This could be explained by a need to defend and rigidify lesbian identity politics against the multiplicity of the younger generations' transinclusive queer identities.

The lost butch

The profound ambivalence regarding trans people, and particularly trans men, originates within the fear that butch identities are on the verge of disappearing. Because 'butch and FTM[26] bodies are read against and through each other for better or for worse' (Halberstam 1998, 149), they have led to the constant pitting of the two identities: one that has resisted and one that has yielded to the sirens of the gender factory.

One factor that fuels this fear is the perceived lack of butch models and the perceived pressure on young butch-to-be women to hormonally and/or surgically transition. The profits that big pharma reaps from the booming gender-reassignment hormones market as well as analogies with conversion therapies are regularly brought up as proof that economic and moral interests are at stake and dangerously reenacting age-old capitalist and patriarchal scenarios:

[26] Female-to-male

> ‘I also think that there’s a medical community and families that, in my day, sent my friends to hospitals to get electroconvulsive therapy because their daughters were lesbians, to make them be girls. And the Pray the Gay Away movement that happened: it had a lot of conversion therapy around it. If you just become a Christian, we can cast the spirit out of you, this evil demon. And that’s been done to me many times. Never worked. The new conversion is medical. And what’s shocking to me is the extent to which the young women are flocking towards it. They’re embracing it and accepting it.’ (P*)

This concern that what seems progressive at first glance is in fact a reactionary homophobic restoration of gender normativity shows up again and again:

> ‘I think the younger generation on some level might be lacking [butch models] because what I see is […] they want to be non-binary, but at the same time, they’re going binary. Like if I’m attracted to another woman, well, maybe I’m a man. They go right back to that place.’ (B*)

And:

> ‘And of course, it happens because this culture is so full of oppressive gender stereotyping. And for me, folks who make that transition either way are stepping from the box that’s oppressive into the other box, just going straight over to being male or female, whichever it is, rather than, “Hey, let’s get rid of those boxes.” That was our perspective. I’m born a woman. I can do anything, you know, in terms of life, choice and vocation and the kind of work I do.’ (C*)

For most of my interviewees, lesbian feminism has operated a subversion of gender norms while trans identities are often branded as sexist and the result of peer pressure[27]. Portrayed as victims of misogyny, trans men are thus often victimized and their agency is questioned. Several of the butch lesbians I met on the lands expressed pride at not having transitioned a couple of decades ago and proudly see themselves as ‘representing the place of most resistance’ (Halberstam, 1998, 148). For some, this has led to a reframing of butchness as the ultimate expression not only of lesbianism, but also of womanhood:

> ‘[Being a butch lesbian] is part of my identity. It’s who I am. It’s physical, spiritual, mental, emotional. […] It’s basically about being a gender agnostic. […] It’s an expression of being a woman that is outside of the accepted social norm for women. That’s what butch is and it has more masculine qualities. Am I aping men? No. I’m more fully a woman than women who are all dressed up in high heels and business suits, who never allow themselves to sort of relax and uncross their legs and breathe. That’s how I embody being a woman.’ (P*)

“Being a woman” is again resignified here: while circling back to the woman=lesbian equation, P* operates a complete reversal of conventional values by making the butch – usually seen as the most masculine of lesbian figures – the most woman of them all. In her definition, the masculine traits are markers of empowerment and freedom while femininity is linked to constriction. For my interviewees, there is thus an imperative need for young butches to have access to these positive examples of womanhood. The necessity of butch

[27] The question of trans men who never identified as lesbian or queer is not treated here as this paper deals with the inclusion or exclusion of trans men who are interested in attending lesbian land events or in joining the lesbian land community.

models justifies the importance of maintaining a lesbian community in which young butches can feel seen. A* analyzes what she sees as the decline of the butch and the rise of the trans man as such:

> 'This good friend of mine [who is a trans man] and I have talked about the idea that the cultural zeitgeist – where you begin your process in terms of coming out or finding your political alliances – is what defines you going forward. They came out 30 years later [than me] and they stepped into the trans world. Their experience was to identify as trans. When I came out, they probably would have named themselves butch. A butch dyke. But that wasn't available to them in the cultural milieu they stepped into.' (A*)

Detransitioned women

Some of the landykes are keen on offering this 'cultural zeitgeist' to the newer generations who they feel have only had access to the trendy, capitalistically-driven and lesbophobic trans ideology. Like any community, they have created safeguards to control who they let in on their lands and each of them has its own policy. Most of them are willing to welcome trans men and non-binary AFAB people as long as they have been vouched for by someone from the community. But some other landykes are more pro-active. Over the course of the years, stemming from the heated online debates around MichFest and/or some direct conversations with trans and queer people on and outside the lands, some of them have decided to address detransitioning or detransitioned women:

> 'We need each other. Alex* is an emissary to the [online] group where she finds these women who are coming out as lesbians. They're detransitioned or they've been in the queer community and queer-identified and they're like, "Oh, this is killing me. It hurts my brain. I can't do it anymore. I need a safe space." Bring them in. Bring them into the campout [on our land].' (P*)

This idea of offering a 'safe space' echoes the lands' original mission to offer sanctuary for lesbians and women. In the tradition of celebrating one's female body and lesbian sexuality, the women who have detransitioned are encouraged to re-embrace their femaleness on the land through collective singing, the reappropriation of a woman-oriented language – for example, getting rid of the ever-pervasive 'guys' in American English and using 'she' as the standard pronoun for all living being – and a warm welcoming as the daughters these lesbian elders were waiting for.

Conclusion

In conclusion, defining what 'woman' means on lesbian lands requires a multilayered answer: first and foremost, 'woman' is centered around the female body, with indisputable biological qualities that reside both on the macro (external genitalia) and the micro level (ovaries, genes, chromosomes). The question of intersex women has recently been raised and has led to a readjusted definition that takes into account the exceptional quality of bodies with intersex variations, though this does not seem to be part of a wider reflection on the possible limitations of such a biological definition.

'Woman' is also defined in a cultural sense: constructed against men and against heterosexuality, this separatist community puts forward a codified form of lesbianism which inextricably articulates 'lesbian' to 'woman'. This articulation further enriches the definition of 'woman' by making space for alternative forms of womanhood, such as the one embodied by butch women. My interviewees' radical lesbianism has thus transformed 'woman' into what they believe is an empowering and freeing category, a shared foundation upon which they can build anything.

However, this conflation of 'woman' with 'lesbian' resists any influence by other forms of lesbianism embodied by former-lesbians- now-trans-men or trans lesbians. If trans men or transmasc people can still retain a place within the community because of their initial biology and/or their connections with some landykes, their position remains precarious and their welcoming varies depending on whether they are seen as traitors or as former butches. Encounters with trans women, on the other hand, have very rarely happened: for most of my interviewees, trans women remain distant, disembodied characters in conversations that have only been one-sided. This imbalance in interpersonal and intergroup relations is one reason that explains the difference between my interviewees' positions on trans men and trans women.

At the core, lesbian lands have always been about providing womyn-born women – and particularly womyn-born lesbians – with a safe, ideal space where they could transcend heterosexist limitations imposed on their bodies and minds from birth and bloom into their womanhood and sexualities. This argument lies at the core of their refusal to invite trans women into their lands. This careful protection has helped create a unique, stimulating gynocentric world; yet, the lands are struggling to attract new members and the number of landykes has been dwindling as they are passing away one by one. There are various factors that account for these diminishing numbers, such as the lack of modern facilities on some lands like indoor plumbing, on-the-grid electricity, or internet and cellular coverage; their rural location, or the discretion they use to maintain safety. Yet, based on conversations I have had with land visitors, some of the landykes' general positions on trans people have also played a key role in keeping younger, queerer, people from settling on their lands.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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