For the Love of Lesbians

A Case for Queer World-Building

Author: Cass Duxbury

Keywords: Gender and Sexuality Studies, Kinship, Lesbianism, Queer World-Building

Abstract:

In this paper, I make a case for the value of a specifically lesbian critique to the world of queer theory and beyond. I begin by discussing some concerns levied against queer theory and lesbian separatism, then offer a definition of lesbianism. Next, I consider how, due to the distance it inhabits from cisheteropatriarchal maleness, lesbianism "fails" by dominant standards for gender performance and kinship relations. In turn, I argue that this failure gives rise to radical creativity, as lesbians reimagine gender, power, and relationality in practice. Finally, I suggest that a lesbian critique, which insists that gender and relationality be matters of love and creativity rather than dominance and hierarchy, can be useful broadly. The unique perspectives arising from lesbian experience can therefore be the basis for a queer world-building project that works to the benefit of all people.

Illustration by Sophia Grace Foder

Lesbian voices are often missing in queer discourses despite the important insights they bring. Lesbianism inhabits a unique distance from patriarchal maleness as opposed to other queer identities. No other orientation is by its nature able to operate at all times completely independently from cisgender, heterosexual men. For this reason, I argue that lesbian experience provides valuable insights into gender hegemony, which refers to the dominant conceptions of gendered life that privilege men and masculinity over women and femininity, and are maintained through behaviours and structures that reinforce these beliefs. In this paper, which is argumentative but has its roots in a profound love for this identity which shapes my life, I analyze the ways in which lesbianism "fails" by dominant standards for gender performance and kinship relations. I argue that this failure gives rise to radical creativity, as lesbians reimagine gender, power, and relationality in practice. Following an analysis of the creative potential arising from lesbian failure, I suggest that the insights derived from lesbian experience need not be useful exclusively to lesbians. A lesbian critique demands the deconstruction of gendered power dynamics in a way that is valuable widely, as the enforcement of cisheteropatriarchal inequity puts pressure on every person's gender possibilities and social life. After addressing some concerns about the limitations of queer politics and explaining

what "lesbian" means to me, I will move on to the analysis of lesbian failure that will inform my claim that a lesbian critique can be the basis for a queer world-building project that works to the benefit of all people.

Addressing Concerns & Defining "Lesbian"

Before analyzing the unique insights arising from lesbian experience, it is important to address some valid criticisms that have been raised about queer politics and to clarify the definition of lesbianism that I will be working from. In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" Cathy Cohen argues that "a truly radical or transformative politics has not resulted from queer activism" because of the problematic perspectives some queers take towards heterosexual people (438). Many queer activists mistakenly consider heterosexuals to be universally privileged and antagonistic to queer aims, rather than acknowledging that heteronormativity harms them too. Queer activists contradict their own rejection of totalizing categories when they group all non-queer people into one uniform group and assume a reductive "dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual" (Cohen 440). The failure of queer theory to translate into a productive queer politic rests on ignorance of the varying proximities to power that people experience based not only on sexual and gender identity, but also race, class, ability, and religion, to name a few (Cohen 452). Sexual norms play a role in other forms of oppression; racialized and impoverished individuals, even when they are heterosexual, suffer from the targeted regulation and degradation of their sexualities. The disproportionate weaponization of sexual violence against Black individuals and the demonization of single mothers on welfare are among many examples of how heterosexual people can be victimized by sexual oppression (Cohen 454-455).

Further to the ways in which gender hegemony harms more than just queer-identified individuals, class and race-based power imbalances also exist among queer people. A queer politic that ignores race and class issues in its pursuit of a narrow conception of queer liberation becomes a racist and classist movement unwelcoming and unhelpful to queers who are affected by these marginalizations and align themselves with non-queer allies they share them with (Cohen 450). Cohen therefore asserts that "queer activists who evoke a single-oppression framework...limit the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics" (441). "Shared history or identity" does not in itself indicate solidarity; Cohen argues instead that "shared marginal relationship to dominant power" ought to be the basis for political allyship (458). Such a shift would allow for people to be united based on their political aspirations, rather than the assumption that shared non-normative identities are enough to align people politically, and that everyone else belongs to the enemy. It is this model for solidarity across difference that I aim to follow in the development of a lesbian critique.

Lesbians have also been the target of fair criticism for relying on a single-oppression framework that esteems womanhood as the sole site of solidarity. The Combahee River Collective (CRC), a Black feminist activist organization, argues in their collective statement that their "situation as Black people necessitates...solidarity around the fact of race." The CRC criticizes lesbian separatists, who advocate for complete rejection of all men and deny the possibility of solidarity with them. Echoing the concerns of the CRC more than twenty years later, Kathy Rudy details how the radical feminist community she lived in crumbled when Black members began to speak up on the issue of race and align themselves with Black men. In "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory," Rudy writes that these radical feminists' "assumption that being lesbian was enough" to bond women together meant that other struggles, such as those to do with race and class, were "forced into secondary positions or overlooked entirely" (200).

Rudy praises the turn she has witnessed in younger, queer-identified lesbian communities towards the kind of politics that Cohen envisions, where shared orientations towards power are prioritized over shared identities.

Echoing Cohen, Rudy imagines that at its best, queer theory rejects "categorization" in favour of "building coalitions of difference along political lines" (213). In contrast to lesbian separatists, queer lesbians take a more nuanced perspective in formulating their politics. For queer lesbians, pitting men and women, or queers and non-queers, against each other as dichotomous and irreconcilable is unproductive; the distinction that matters most is "between those who espouse progressive politics...and those who don't" (Rudy 209). This new generation of lesbians refuses to enforce any "membership criteria for queerness" other than the shared commitment to identifying and critiquing sexual norms (Rudy 212).

While she admires the radical shift among young queers, Rudy raises an important concern with queer activists that claim to reject gender hierarchy meanwhile favouring aggressive political tactics traditionally associated with masculinity. The queer circles Rudy observes "easily dismiss the domesticity and emotionality associated with the private sphere...in favor of the dynamism, development, and aggression of the public" (218). The devaluation of what has been historically considered 'women's work' risks relegating these forms of labour to underprivileged communities. Rudy aptly summarizes that

> somebody has to do these things, and if they're not done by queers, they will be done by women, and if some 'women' manage to get out of these tasks by identifying themselves as queer, then the work will be done by women of color and other disenfranchised people who cannot afford the luxury of an identity like queer. (219)

In other words, when queers espouse defiant pride as the only way to be queer, those who are also marginalized along race and class get left behind. This is because having the option to be openly queer is a privilege, so the emphasis on being queer in public excludes those who do not have access to the protection offered by being white and upper-class. Rudy therefore argues that queer theory should retain radical feminism's original commitment to valuing the work that women have historically been responsible for. Until gendered social roles are fully deconstructed, it is vital to "pay as much attention to the functions of (what we used to call) women, as we do to overcoming or rising above such categorization" (Rudy 220-221).

Before I move on to a case study of lesbianism, I note that in the spirit of both Rudy and Cohen, I intentionally do not offer an explicit, inflexible definition of "lesbian." Extensive discourse about who can or cannot claim this identity is neither productive nor relevant to the arguments I make in this paper. Importantly, I reject any lesbianism that is exclusive to cisgender women, and like Cohen, I know that every individual that shares this label in common with me is not automatically my ally. Most generally, I think of lesbianism as a label that anyone with some lived experience of 'womanhood' who experiences attraction primarily or exclusively to other people with a relationship to womanhood can claim, regardless of their gender identity (trans or otherwise), sex, or sexual history. Lesbian, to me, is both a gender and a sexual/romantic orientation, though lesbians may identify with the term in both these respects to varying extents.

The definition I work from is intentionally broad, but not completely open-ended. I hope to make clear that lesbianism is about self-identification and self-affirmation, coupled with a sense of community and solidarity with other lesbians. While I reject unnecessarily divisive identity politics, I see the value in labels that allow us to understand and affirm ourselves alongside those who share them with us. We can do this at the same time as we pursue allyship with all who share our political aspirations, regardless of the identities and experiences that we do or do not have in common. In this paper, the perspectives made available specifically through lesbian experience form the basis for a critique that can be useful more broadly for thinking about alternatives to restrictive gender and kinship hegemony.

Lesbianism: A Queer Case Study

Perhaps paradoxically, I believe that the promise of lesbianism as a case study in queer world-building begins with its status as a "failure" by dominant conceptions of gender and kinship. In his introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam writes that "failure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well" (3). Failure, as Halberstam understands it, "allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior" (3). In other words, failing by externally imposed standards for success can allow us the freedom to operate outside of them. Failing therefore provides the opportunity "to poke holes in the toxic positivity" of socially enforced standards of normalcy (Halberstam 3). In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed writes in "Unhappy Queers" that being "happily queer" in a world that ascribes unhappiness to queer life can make obvious "the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity" (117). By Ahmed's view, choosing self-acceptance and fulfillment in queerness in the face of a world that considers queerness an "unhappiness-cause" is a radical act (95).

"Failing" to adhere to norms that are themselves constraining and harmful therefore makes room for powerful critiques of these norms, and gives us the potential to prove that something *can* be created outside of them. Lesbianism fails at gender and relational norms in a unique way due to its distance from maleness, the centre of patriarchy. This is because lesbian identity and relationships by definition do not incorporate and appease cisgender men. Lesbianism is particularly threatening to gender hegemony precisely because it proves that there are relational forms that do not need to orient themselves around a negotiation of male dominance. Halberstam writes that "gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals" (4). The spectacular failure of lesbianism therefore gives lesbians the ability to envision new ways for people to perform gender and relate to one another. As I will discuss, lesbianism in practice both critiques gender hegemony and is itself evidence of the possibility of gender performances that are not reducible to oppressive power dynamics or essentialist gender expectations.

First and most obviously, lesbianism reimagines womanhood. In an analysis that echoes the problems Cohen and Rudy identify with narrow identity politics, Ladelle McWhorter attempts in her essay "Practicing, Practicing" to formulate a solution to the "the turn away from radical creativity and toward discovery...[that] haunts all of feminism" (151). She argues that feminist woman-affirming practices are not as liberating as they ought to be, because in order for women to collectively 'return to' and affirm their inherent womanhood, the term must be defined in advance. While intended to be a productive solution to the degradation of women, McWhorter identifies "a demand that [one] abandon [their] developmental self" in the celebration of a supposedly innate, static, and shared experience of womanhood (155). In this way, many feminists still depend on the essentialization of womanness, simply re-valuing it as positive and empowering.

Offering *self*-affirmation as an alternative to woman-affirmation, McWhorter argues for the importance of "find[ing] ways to rethink, but even more importantly to re-create...both the concept and experience of womanhood" (156). She considers that 'womanhood' may be thought of "not as a category of human being," but rather as a site for the "creative formation" of a deeply personal understanding of one's gender (156). I consider McWhorter's critique to be relevant to lesbian experience. Given that womanhood has historically been defined in relation to some idea of manhood, lesbianism as independent from manhood entails vexed relationships to womanhood. The empowerment that lesbians find in spite of, or perhaps because of, their complicated proximity to traditional womanness is evidence for the value of the self-affirming practices that McWhorter advocates for. When narrowly conceived womanhood fails, the commitment to interrogating identity categories in pursuit of constructive and personal relationships to gender is vital. A lesbian critique has the potential to escape the totalizing tendency that some feminisms have failed to get away from, as solidarity among those with lived experience of

patriarchal womanhood can occur alongside the tension and variation inevitable in any conscious engagement with one's gender.

To discuss the potential for resistance to masculine hegemony through lesbian gender performances requires an understanding of the existing model of gender hierarchization that lesbianism must work from. In "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt explain that hegemonic masculinity does not refer to "a certain type of man," but rather to "a way that men position themselves" in relation to others through their ways of being and interacting (841). Men are defined by their proximity to an ideal which, whether or not it is achievable, determines their position in a culture of social dominance and subordination. Importantly, this process "requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women" (Connell & Messerschmidt 844). Thus, given the relational nature of gender, women are also implicated in any model of gender hierarchization, and hegemony is impacted by "new configurations of women's identity and practice" in addition to men's (Connell & Messerschmidt 848). I argue that lesbianism, by definition entailing unique relational formations that complicate 'normal' gendered power dynamics because they do not involve cisgender men, can be an important site for analysis. Lesbiandisruption of gender hegemony can therefore act as a "demonstration of its vulnerability" and of alternatives to it (Connell & Messerschmidt 851).

If gender failure is to be thought of as "a refusal of mastery" (Halberstam 11), then lesbian ways of being and relating, unconstrained by the heteropatriarchal ideals they will never live up to, can be a site for reimagining normative gender performance in practice. In "Patriarchy Interrupted: Differential Realizations and Manifestations of Power in Butch/Femme Relationships," Rachel Silverman and Kristin Comeforo argue that "femme and butch identities disrupt the hegemonic power of the gender binary" (146). While outwardly appearing to imitate heteronormative gender performances, butch and femme lesbians in fact *rethink* gender as they construct themselves "outside of the male gaze" (Silverman & Comeforo 145). Silverman and Comeforo write that lesbian "gender performances are imbued with, and derived from, power;" subsequently, the ways in which lesbians disrupt patriarchal power dynamics in their relationships is what makes their genders "transgressive" (148). Independently from the constraints of normative expectations about what it is to be a 'man', and to be a 'woman' in relation to a man, lesbians experiment with the concepts of masculinity and femininity without having to ascribe superiority to either of them.

As a butch-femme couple, Silverman and Comeforo construct and enact gender in relation to each other, exchanging and deconstructing power with a "fluidity [that] is the opposite of patriarchy" with all its entrenched rules and limitations (148). Butch individuals, whose gender expression is typically more outwardly masculine, more visibly experiment with a synthesis of masculinity and experience of womanhood; however, femme individuals' engagement with taken-for-granted norms of femininity also results in "a more conscious understanding of gender performance" (Silverman & Comeforo 146). As every lesbian gender performance complicates ideas of masculinity and femininity by enacting them outside of the male gaze, lesbian experimentations with gender "can be used as a weapon to dismantle the patriarchal gender binary" (Silverman & Comeforo 146). Lesbians exercise radical creativity as they relate to each other without cisgender heterosexual male intervention, and with a critical attitude derived from shared experience of patriarchal subordination under the constraining gender norms they "fail" at.

Following from the ways in which gendered hierarchies of power can be disrupted within lesbian identities and relationships, lesbianism in turn models alternative kinship formations. In "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family," Kim Tallbear explains that the patriarchal nuclear family structure is a settler-colonial invention that has been enforced to oppress and assimilate Indigenous peoples. She argues that many Indigenous kinship formations, based on interdependence and collective caretaking, "*[exceed]* rather than *[fail] to meet* the

requirements of settler sex and family" (156). For Tallbear, deconstructing the colonial idea of the nuclear family will involve "recognizing possibilities of other types of intimacies" not bound to reproduction and the self-contained family unit (154). Tallbear suggests that nonmonogamy is one way of disrupting the constraining norms of settler sexuality, and I argue that lesbian communities also provide an example of the ways in which groups of people can "collectively fortify" each other (163).

Lesbians regularly relate to each other in ways that transcend the limits of traditional relationships, blurring the lines between intimate relationships and friendship. For lesbians, the closeness and camaraderie of women's friendships exists alongside sexual and romantic attraction and relationships. Lesbian communities can therefore be spaces where "love and relations are not considered scarce objects" (Tallbear 163). Beyond personal relationships, Elizabeth Currans argues in "Claiming Deviance and Honoring Community: Creating Resistant Spaces in U.S. Dyke Marches" that Dyke Marches complicate an "easy distinction between social and political work" (95). Sistahs Steppin' in Pride, a Dyke March organized by Black lesbians, prioritizes "communal care" with emphasis on both "sexual and nonsexual love" in the face of a culture that fails to care for Black women (Currans 96). The New York Dyke March offers a different but nonetheless transgressive vision, organizing defiantly around a shared "rejection of cultural norms" that regulate sexuality (Currans 76). In advocating for and celebrating themselves, lesbians resist normative expectations for kinship, emphasizing instead the interdependence implied in Tallbear's "spider's web of relations" (161). The fluidity central to lesbian ways of being and relating runs counter to normative tendencies that draw harsh distinctions between sexual, personal, and political social life.

Lesbianism and Queer World-Building

In "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about Intersectionality?" Kevin Duong outlines the requirements for an effective queer politic reminiscent of Cohen's de-emphasis on identity categories. For Duong, a truly transformative queer politic must rest on a "collective *politicized* identity" from which people act towards a shared "vision of justice" (372). Subsequently, "demographic commonality" is less important to such a politic than is the shared desire for transformative action (Duong 380). As with Halberstam's conception of failure, queer world-building has "a fundamentally creative or inventive dimension" (Duong 380). This creative element is visible in the lesbian relationships that Silverman and Comeforo describe, where in a space "of sexuality and of otherness, there is equality...[and] a redefining of power and a reimagining of what can be" (152). Creativity is also key to McWhorter's envisioning of womanhood as a space for tension and construction rather than predetermination. Furthermore, a creative dimension appears in Currans' account of Dyke Marches, which "queer public space" in order to "model alternative visions of social relationships" to the people in their communities (74).

Lesbian solidarity stems from deep dissatisfaction with taken-for-granted beliefs about gender, power, and human relationships. Lesbian creativity acts on outrage at the incessant hierarchization and policing of gendered life, proving in practice that gender can exist without hierarchization and dominance, and that intimate partner love can exist within and alongside collective interdependence. In "Love as Political Resistance," adrienne maree brown writes that "we need to learn how to practice love such that care—for ourselves and others—is understood as political resistance and cultivating resilience" (24), and I believe that lesbians have long understood love this way. To "cultivate...cultures within a society invested in [our] devaluation" (Currans 75) is radical, and we do it every day.

While I have argued that due to its inherent distance from maleness, lesbianism specifically offers unique perspectives on and reimaginings of oppressive gender hegemony, I believe that these insights can be meaningful for anyone who is unsatisfied with the constraints of dominant gender norms. Ahmed

writes that "we must stay unhappy with this world" that polices human life according to limited ideals of happiness and normalcy (105). A lesbian critique, which derives from but is not exclusively beneficial for lesbians, refuses any 'happiness' that has a place for oppressive gender hierarchy, and it welcomes anyone who shares this perspective. In this way lesbianism, a unique site of gender failure and reconstruction, alternative kinship forms, and radical creativity, can be a jumping-off point for the "leap from individual subjectivity to shared collective identity" (Duong 382) that imagines a queer world *for us all* where gender and relationality are not matters of dominance, but of love and creativity.

Conclusion

I have argued that because lesbians inevitably fail to live up to normative beliefs about how people should enact gender and relate with each other, lesbianism enables the creative power to subvert and reimagine what it means to be gendered and in relation with others. Lesbians can experiment with gender outside of the male gaze and without pressure to recreate the power imbalances that patriarchy demands. The ability to imagine gender outside of power is an incredible strength of lesbianism; I draw on this insight, as well as on a rejection of narrow identity politics, to suggest that anyone, no matter their sexual or gender orientation, can commit to practicing gender from a similar place of intention and care. What might our social relations look like if they were not always limited by a gendered power matrix that affects all of us? Lesbians prove that it is possible to enact gender, and to do so in relation with others, without paying regard to the power inequities associated with patriarchal conceptions of cisgender, heterosexual manhood. As a blueprint for transformative enactments of gender and kinship that run intentionally counter to restrictive hegemony, the unique insights derived from lesbianism can provide the foundation of a queer world vision that works for everyone.

Works Cited

adrienne maree brown. "Love as Political Resistance." *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, AK Press, 2019, pp. 24-25. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=2005069&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Ahmed, Sara. "Unhappy Queers." *The Promise of Happiness*, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 88-120.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1997, pp. 437–65.

Combahee River Collective. Statement. "The Combahee River Collective Statement."1977.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–59.

Currans, Elizabeth. "Claiming Deviance and Honoring Community: Creating Resistant Spaces in U.S. Dyke Marches." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, pp. 73-101 *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23275090.

Duong, Kevin. "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about Intersectionality?" *Politics & Gender*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2012, pp. 370-386.

Halberstam, Jack. "Introduction: Low Theory." *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke UP, 2011, pp. 1-25.

McWhorter, Ladelle. "Practicing Practicing." *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Diana Taylor and Karen Vintges, U of Illinois P, 2004, pp. 143-162.

Rudy, Kathy. "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2001, pp. 191–222.

Silverman, R. E., and K. Comeforo. "Patriarchy Interrupted: Differential Realizations and Manifestations of Power in Butch/Femme Relationships." *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 144-156–156.

Tallbear, Kim. "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family." *Making Kin Not Population*, edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, Prickly Paradigm P, 2018, pp. 145-209.