

The Problematic Nature of the Lesbian-Feminist and Postmodernist Definitions of the Lesbian

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What exactly is a lesbian? In standard dictionary terms, the lesbian is defined as “a woman who is sexually attracted to other women” (“Lesbian”). But this simple definition poses more questions than it gives answers: Are all women that are sexually attracted to other women lesbians? Does a woman have to subscribe to the lesbian label herself or does it suffice that others attribute it to her? How do we define a woman in order to be able to define a lesbian? How do female individuals that are sexually attracted to women, but refute the label “woman” and/or the label “lesbian,” fit into the picture?

Clearly, the definition of the lesbian evokes many complicated questions about gender and sexuality. In this essay, I will examine the problematic nature of the term “lesbian” by analyzing the two predominant concepts of how to define the lesbian in the twentieth century: The lesbian-feminist approach of the 1970s and the postmodernist approach. After comparing these two concepts and pointing out their theoretical and practical flaws, I will consider an approach outlined by scholars Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope and discuss how their take on the lesbian may balance out the problems of the lesbian-feminist and postmodernist approaches.

Historically, the definition of the lesbian has not always been shaped by lesbians themselves. At the beginning of the twentieth century, sexologists conceptualized individuals that displayed sexual attractions deviating from the norm of heterosexuality as “inverts” (Taylor 288). This term demonstrates that homosexual tendencies were believed to be an inversion of natural instincts (288), and were therefore considered unnatural. The sexologists at the time could only comprehend sexual attraction towards females as male sexuality, which is why they concluded that masculine gender presentation was a key factor in identifying the “female sexual invert” or “lesbian” (288). For example, Richard Krafft-Ebing defined female homosexuality as “the masculine soul heaving in the female bosom” (qtd. in Taylor 288). The lesbian was therefore marked by masculinity – the figure of the “mannish lesbian” was born into the public mind.

This conceptualization of the lesbian persisted until the 1970s, when lesbian-feminists sought to redefine the lesbian as a figure of essential femininity (Farwell 64). Poet and

essayist Adrienne Rich, for example, interpreted lesbianism as the “primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (qtd. in Farwell 64). Rich’s interpretation omits the sexual element of lesbianism and instead emphasizes the commonalities between all women, in that they are oppressed by a patriarchal societal order and should therefore bond together in the fight against it. Her conceptualization inserts a lesbian element into the very heart of the feminist movement and – considering the marginalization lesbians experienced within the mainstream feminist movement (Westerband) – delegitimizes this exclusion by claiming the nature of feminism as essentially lesbian. (Berens 12)

This concept of the lesbian as an essentially feminine, female figure poses many questions as well as potential problems. First of all, Rich’s definition seems to open up the label “lesbian” to all women, regardless of sexual orientation. If any woman can identify as lesbian, does the term remain meaningful at all? (Berens 12) Does that not silence the needs of women who love women and are discriminated against because of their sexual orientation? But also, who or what enforces the notion that every woman who labels herself a lesbian is also sexually attracted to women? Furthermore, the notion of essential femininity begs the question how women whose gender presentation does not conform to stereotypical femininity fit into the picture. Are individuals that reject the label “woman” included? Can a genderqueer or gender-nonconforming or agender person still label themselves a lesbian? This definition of lesbian seems to fashion itself so it is not excluded by the feminist mainstream movement, but at the same time it excludes, for example, butch lesbians and others that do not subscribe to traditional femininity.

Since the conflation of the lesbian with masculinity and femininity both seem to be highly problematic, postmodernist scholars have attempted to empty the meaning from identity categories altogether beginning in the late twentieth century. For example, Judith Butler argues in her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (308). Butler, therefore, does not make a difference between male sexologists marking the lesbian as masculine and lesbian-feminists marking the lesbian as essentially feminine, because defining the lesbian in any way will become regulatory and constricting

(Berens 13). Instead, Butler asserts that she “would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign [lesbian] signifies” (“Imitation” 308).

Butler establishes the logic behind her argument by clearly separating sex and gender, and therefore emphasizing that gender is not the necessary consequence of biological sex, but instead culturally constructed (*Gender Trouble* 6). By questioning and refuting the naturalness of gender, Butler illustrates that the meaning of gender is not simply given, but is repetitively being produced and performed (24). Just as gender is culturally constructed, the meaning of sexual identity categories – such as “lesbian” – is produced by culture and therefore subject to historical change, as I have demonstrated before. Thus, there cannot be one single true meaning to the term “lesbian,” because it can be arbitrarily filled with meaning (or completely emptied) at any time by any subject that chooses to employ it.

However, liberating the term “lesbian” from a specific meaning has been opposed by a number of scholars on multiple grounds. Marilyn Farwell, Professor Emerita at University of Oregon and author of *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*, argues that in emptying the lesbian label of meaning, one “capitulates to Western culture’s systematic ignorance” (19) of the lesbian and actively participates in erasing the lesbian figure. Instead, she calls for “reconstruction, the production of alternative modes and models for subjectivity” (19). On the other hand, Butler would still point out that even a reconfiguration or new construction of the lesbian image still constitutes a regulation of identity and that any system of defining the lesbian becomes as problematic and arbitrary as the one that preceded it. (Berens 15)

The issue of erasure still holds an important point, however, as Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope assert in their anthology *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory*. The authors argue that the removal of meaning erases the lesbian from discourse and emphasize that “whatever discourse may say about us (Lesbians), we exist, materially, outside of discourse” (Wolfe 9). Furthermore, Wolfe and Penelope lament the fact that the lack of a clear definition of the lesbian complicates the construction of a shared basis – for example, a collective history and a common lesbian identity – which would allow for allegiance as well as political representation of real, material lesbians (7).

The approach that Wolfe and Penelope take in order to suggest a definition of the lesbian with the goal of allegiance and political representation in mind is to anchor the lesbian in her experience of invisibility: “Most Lesbians spend portions of our lives invisible to ourselves as well as to others” (12). The belonging to the category “lesbian” therefore becomes rooted not in a set of traits that the subject is supposed to possess – such as a certain

sexuality – but rather in the shared experience of grappling with the challenges of living in a heteronormative and patriarchal society. This approach seems to address some of the problems with the lesbian-feminist definition that I established earlier, in that it seizes on the idea of a common experience as a shared ground, but puts sexuality back in the picture to distinguish lesbian women from heterosexual women and acknowledge the additional layer of oppression they face due to their sexuality. This definition also seems to balance the postmodernist criticism of imposing certain traits onto the lesbian. On the other hand, postmodernists might still argue that the discussion could arise on how the experience of oppression and invisibility exactly manifests itself, which again poses the risk of constructing a new essentialist category that individuals are arbitrarily included in or excluded from. However, if the goal is not philosophical debate but allegiance and political representation of material individuals or subjects, the postmodernist removal of meaning does not seem to be able to provide a practical solution for the real challenges that non-heterosexual individuals face within society.

To conclude, I have demonstrated that both the lesbian-feminist definition as well as the postmodernist definition of the lesbian have problematic elements. The lesbian-feminist definition puts femininity at its center, which opens up the term to women that do not experience marginalization due to their sexuality and at the same time excludes women that are oppressed due to their sexuality, but do not subscribe to traditional feminine gender presentation or feminine labels or experiences. The postmodernist definition, on the other hand, while in theory making a good point about the regulating nature of identity categories and their culturally produced meanings, does not hold up to the necessity of allegiance within and political representation of the community. Wolfe and Penelope's approach seems to balance out these problems by focusing on a shared experience between lesbians rather than certain traits. What also seems to facilitate the situation is the emergence of the term "queer" as a reclaimed term of self-description within the LGBTQ+ community. The term encompasses all sexualities that differ from heterosexuality and therefore also includes people that may not be comfortable with the lesbian label, or any label at all, due to the different meanings that have been projected onto it historically.

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