Finding and Studying Lesbian Culture

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Recommended Citation
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On a Wednesday afternoon in the dead of winter, twelve lesbians met to begin a six-week exploration of our culture. Our most immediate and persistent awareness was lack of precedent; our sense of breaking new ground added excitement and urgency to all our meetings. We felt a deep frustration at how hard it is to “study” something for the first time. Out of our experience together, we want to share what we found, and, even more, our process. We hope this process may serve as a model from which others can begin their investigations within their own communities. By sharing method, we can evolve a fruitful way to talk about lesbian culture, leaving behind the bankruptcy of social science.

The group began as part of an aftercare program at Christopher Street, a drug treatment center in Minneapolis, for lesbians and homosexual men. I was asked by the staff if I would facilitate a study group on some topic that might interest the women. Knowing my own dissatisfaction with how lesbians have been studied, and feeling a need to focus the group on a topic about which neither I nor they were experts, I chose the matrix of lesbian culture. For thirteen years, I have taught English literature and later women's studies at the University of Minnesota. Over those years, I have grown progressively more impatient with the usual structures and goals of education. I wanted to see if I could use my teaching skills in a setting where participants would have no external reasons for staying with the group unless it addressed genuine personal and intellectual needs.

The background of the group is varied. Though most have been chemically dependent, women have worked with us who are not; we are open to any lesbian wishing to study her culture. Our ages range from 19 to 45; “formal” education extends from grade school through a Ph.D., though most of the women attended some or all of a four-year college. We come from the Midwest predominantly, though the South and East are represented. As far as our sexual histories go, we include born dykes, a recent divorcée, and several women who have realized their lesbianism within the women’s movement during the past two or three years. We are white except for one Native American woman; several women express strong ethnic identification (Jewish, Scandinavian, southern).

As for class, I consciously delayed exploring that dimension until after the initial stages of our work/study. We wanted to see if any common factors could be identified as those of lesbian culture, regardless of socioeconomic and political differences. We have continued the group, however, and are even now, at several participants’ request, discussing our class background. The group seems evenly divided between middle and lower or working class, though education has confused many of us working-class women, and decisions to live alternatively have caused downward mobility for some of the middle-class women. Once we’ve completed our work on class and its relationship to our being lesbians, we may well report our findings in a separate piece.

Design

Out of a personal conviction that our deepest notions of culture begin with and center on ourselves, our behavior, and our values, I brought to the opening session the idea of four concentric circles within which we might operate. We labeled each circle, beginning with “me” for the inner circle. The second rim was “you’s” or lesbians immediately connected with us, our own special community, with whom we can check perceptions, feelings, questions. The circle beyond this group was “we” or Lesbians living in other places, with whom we may come into contact at special moments (conferences, concerts, speeches). We have less direct ties with this group, a relatively more abstract relationship. Into this group we put women contributing to present lesbian culture, e.g., T. Grace Atkinson, Margie Adam, Jeannette Foster, Willie Tyson, Rita Mae Brown, May Sarton, Meg Christian, Adrienne Rich, Jane Rule, Alix Dobkin, Bertha Harris, Jean O’Leary.

These women form a new circle because separation of space and more subtle factors make them less accessible. I can identify and connect with a poem of May Sarton’s or a song of Alix Dobkin’s, but I cannot really know why they made those pieces or what they feel or think about various issues surrounding lesbianism. We are linked, however, through a medium which defies geographical location and generational differences. These ties are significant because they widen my sense of concentric circles of lesbian life and because at certain moments the intensity of response cuts through the layers between us. I begin to feel echoes of my personal and communal life—I begin to feel expansive, part of a great web centering on me and stretching through time and across nationality and custom.

At the outermost circumference were the “dead they’s”—Lesbians from former times whose lives and thoughts have been preserved. Until recently, we have had perforce to know of such women from male, heterosexist publishers. Our discovery of them has thus been clouded. Women have now begun to publish materials on these lesbians which will be more trustworthy than older versions. Men’s translations of Sappho’s poetry, for example, are the ones to reach print, and though such men may have admired her, they have conveyed a skewed picture of her and her work. With Mary Bernard’s translation, we finally have a woman’s version of what Sappho was up to. To read Bernard and an earlier translation side by side enlivens the problem before us. Our group agreed that contemporary and future lesbian scholars must redo much that history has overlooked or misinterpreted. The prospect for at least several decades—of gently brushing away the dust of neglect and crud of denial—made us feel that special breath-holding which must accompany any archaeological dig. And the civilization we uncover will be our own, not some faraway, foreign example of quaint structures and residual mores.
Process
We began with ourselves, the “me” of the design, telling each other details from our lives which are pertinent to our being lesbians. We divided our autobiographies into two segments—one prior to age ten (before we had begun to menstruate or get caught up in the dating maze) and one from age ten to the present. Once we all had told our stories, we looked for common details and emerging patterns, and found the following connecting themes:

- a prevalent feeling of being isolated and lonely—an “outsider”—from childhood
- a sense of ourselves as different from those around us
- seeing ourselves as survivors, with a strong endurance factor, not to be kept down indefinitely
- a feeling that we’re getting just isn’t enough
- a sense that we’re very strong or very weak, dealing or hiding; we work hard for any balance in our daily lives
- a feeling that there are few places where or times when we can relax and play
- an inability to forget or avoid what we know (about self, others, the world)
- a feeling that the outdoors has been positive space for us
- a sense of having been tomboys for too long.

Our next step was for each of us to talk with at least one lesbian not in our group, until we found some point of similarity. From these conversations, we became surer of our initial perceptions. Some of us continue to connect stories with friends, believing that their agreement with and additions to our original list add strength and depth to a consistent pattern of lesbian feelings and ideas. The next step has been to read and listen to “live they” stories/theories and see how often we find similar conditions and responses. The final step will be to read lives of, conditions for, and works by lesbians of the past, again looking for common experience. To the extent that such links can be made between my life, the lives of my friends, and lives of famous lesbians and/or their creations, I can feel less isolated and unique. I can understand that my perceptions are not shaped only by my particular circumstances and makeup; they have to do with the process of becoming a lesbian regardless of time, place, or situation.

Rationale
Why is such an awareness helpful? For the reasons that her history and culture are vital to any woman: without a sense that I go back further than my literal birth, I find it difficult to feel substantial or to resist strains on my energy and self-respect caused by attitudes toward me both as woman and as lesbian. Like heterosexual feminists, lesbians need to meet together for solidarity. Knowing that my story falls into a context of other, older stories (whether of accomplishment or horror) lets me believe in my ability to survive. To remain isolated from my own lesbian culture for one more day delays beyond all acceptable limits my coming into my own strength and power.

In sharing expectations we have when meeting another lesbian, we laughed as we agreed that such expectations could not possibly be met by a mere mortal dyke. As we tried to identify why we continue to express them, someone remarked that “even if a given lesbian falls short of my high expectations, she supports me just by existing in the world.” Such simple and profound affirmation gives us an advantage over many groups sharing styles or aims. Though we may succumb periodically to cynicism in the face of unmet expectations, our willingness to resist generalization becomes powerful when we understand it as a survival strategy for our own culture that runs so counter to the dominant culture’s values and dictates.

Myths/Rituals
An entire session was devoted to current myths about lesbians, producing a predictable run-down of negative stereotypes held about us by the society in which we grow up, get educated, work, and try to live. Old angers surfaced at such a shoddy state of affairs, since we realized that all such myths are imposed from outside, that the best we can usually do is make satires or humor of what is intended to keep us depressed and frightened. In an attempt to translate anger into positive energy, we named those myths which have had the most severe impact on our lives.

For several, the myth that lesbians are not “real women” has weighed heavily on our growing up, forcing us to try out masculine roles in an attempt to fit society’s view. A parallel version of this myth was one woman’s sense that she was labeled “unable to get a man.” This kept her from following her feelings, especially during high school, when she knew she was a lesbian but, in order to cope with her environment, withdrew from people who told her that she could change if she just tried to date boys.

The myth most often cited was that lesbians are sick: “I thought I had to go get cured”; “I was chronically depressed and unable to cope, which made me feel irresponsible and pretty near to what the myth wanted me to feel—sick”; “Because I know unsympathetic people would see me as somehow unclean, diseased, I buy into their myth by hiding my lesbianism”; “I don’t want to be limited to the society of lesbians, so I worry about saying who I am, since other people will think I’m weird and stay away.” Two members talked of ways in which the myth of lesbians as child-molesters kept them from forming friendships or from showing affection to women; both said that because they accepted this myth, they denied their sexuality and with it all feelings, holding themselves rigid so as not to touch anyone or let anyone know they wanted to be touched.

In trying to see how such myths operate, we discussed internalizing negative stereotypes, a process which keeps us victims of the very system which fears us. Several women argued strongly that we must reverse this process, by refusing to absorb the dominant society’s myths, by turning self-hatred outward, and by fighting back. For some, this has meant participating in lesbian/gay rights marches or action programs; for others, it involves saying out loud at work or in other nonlesbian settings that we are lesbians. For many, it
has involved taking ourselves seriously enough to seek help in ending habits which keep energy depressed and our sense of self-worth silenced or weakened.

Finally, we focused on the stark truth that those externally imposed myths, which have tremendous power over us individually and as a culture, have been made up either to keep us incapacitated or to keep a homophobic society from examining its own problems with sexuality. Trying to think of indigenous myths, we felt sadness and anger because we could not list any. We talked of the function of myth and rituals, concluding that they exorcise, cleanse, and heal an individual member of a culture so that she can function more fully within her group. We affirmed the power of rituals to be tangible proof of our realities, the ability of participants to speak a reality into existence, to say "it is" because I name it and you recognize it. Lesbians need to design their own rituals, not list any. We talked of the function and declarative power of rituals.

To participate in a culture's rituals is to take responsibility for our own lives.

To participate in a ritual is to call attention to ourselves, and for some of us that raises specters of punishment from outside and of guilt or confusion from inside.

To participate in a culture's rituals is to declare a willingness to be accountable to that larger group. That's just plain scary.

We talked about ways to guard against a deadness which we legitimately reject in many existing rituals. Flexibility, participation, and focus seem to be goals offering some assurance of vitality. In addition, we talked of continually changing lesbian rituals, so as to work against their becoming hollow.

Then we evolved an exciting list of moments in our lives as lesbians which deserve ritualization. They share a quality of being difficult times which can be made easier by group activity acknowledging a particular lesbian's struggle, and, most important, the commonness surrounding it in the lives of an entire culture:

- coming out
- losing our blood families
- creating intentional families
- leaving the church
- arriving as a new member of a community
- getting into relationships
- the sexual aspect of lesbian relationships
- the end of relationships
- aging as a dyke
- movement into and out of solitude.*

These are more than mirrors of the dominant society's ceremonies, and in each instance we agreed that we have experienced them often, painfully, and with effort. It would have been healing and helpful if we could have attended a ritual built to acknowledge such moments. We didn't want to wait for someone else to address this need. After working together, we had a certain clarity about many aspects and problems of lesbian culture. We felt an impulse to nurture our culture as well as study it. Consequently, our work group planned and staged a massive Coming Out Ritual, held in the country on the first Sunday in May. This ritual celebrated women who had come out, ever, over two hundred women attended. Some of us had known for years that we were lesbians. We may have shared that knowledge with isolated friends or with employers and the larger world. Nevertheless, these announcements had been events at which we had done most of the work. The process had resembled a dramatic presentation more than a healing ritual. Our goal now was to affirm this cultural watershed, and to begin to discuss our need for many rituals. Through such events we can come to know our boundaries, and to delineate our lives publicly, along lines of shared experience and reaction.

What Next

Having spent concentrated time talking out these issues, we are now eager to try out our process with other lesbians. One way to ensure our future is by recording stories until they overlap and become legend. We also want to publish our process in lesbian journals, papers, newsletters, in the hope that others will organize similar work groups, discuss our infant model, and use it, possibly in modified form. If you then share your results with us, we can establish a network of lesbians engaged in direct cultural analysis. Eventually we can devise a tested and valid method to use in large-scale study of us.

The gains of such a process are immeasurable to those of us doing it and to lesbians who will follow us. What this generation of dykes could leave to our cultural posterity is a way to organize our chaotic, often painful experience into some body of data (hard and very soft) which would let lesbians five or fifty years from now build new layers from an already-articulated base. Such a system would offer lesbians and the (homophobic) society at large much-needed information about our history, our artifacts, and our day-to-day lives. For most of us, no such information existed, and we had the grim alternative of reading false, even destructive, things about ourselves in standard textbooks, or of remaining ignorant. At present, much is being published by individual lesbians and by clusters of lesbians. What is missing is a systematic analysis of us as a culture, and that is where we hope our work can be helpful.

*At a recent meeting of lesbians, we presented our process and results. Those present added several cogent moments: housewarming, accepting children into a community, haircutting, getting and losing a job as an open lesbian, dying.