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“MY GENDER IS LESBIAN”: COMMUNITY BUILDING AND THE ENDURANCE
OF THE LESBIAN IN QUEER TIMES

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Adriana Sisko
Lexington, Kentucky
Director: Dr. Melissa Stein, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies
Lexington, Kentucky
2021

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

“MY GENDER IS LESBIAN”: COMMUNITY BUILDING AND THE ENDURANCE OF THE LESBIAN IN QUEER TIMES

During 2016, the same year news of lesbian bar closures hit mainstream media, a small cluster of Tumblr users began to discuss a new gender and sexual identity, nonbinary lesbian, to describe those who identify both as nonbinary and as lesbian. Nonbinary lesbians stand at the crossroads of modern and postmodern identity constructs, engaging in contradictions and ambiguities for the sake of authentic self-expression. What does this demonstrate about the evolution of lesbian identity, particularly as lesbian bars continue to close around the United States? This dissertation explores this question by comparing and contrasting the discursive practices and strategies of nonbinary lesbians on Tumblr with those of women who once converged at The Country, a women’s bar that closed during the early 1980s in Lexington, Kentucky. How are community boundaries delineated in material lesbian space versus digital lesbian space? What discursive strategies are relied upon to legitimate lesbian identity? In order to answer these questions, this dissertation engages in computer-mediated discourse analysis of over 1,600 Tumblr posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag from 2016-2020, and places those posts in conversation with the oral history accounts of 14 women who used to frequent The Country. Overall, this dissertation particularly focuses on themes of desire, safety, authenticity, and validity. Ultimately, this dissertation concludes that nonbinary lesbian identity represents a lesbian post-gender that allows individuals to express specificity of desire in spaces that emphasize queer ambiguity.

KEYWORDS: Lesbian Identity, Lesbian Bar Cultures,
Participatory Subcultures, Tumblr, Nonbinary Identity, Queer

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12/09/2021

Date

“MY GENDER IS LESBIAN”: COMMUNITY BUILDING AND THE ENDURANCE
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DEDICATION

To my partner, Hagan,
and to lesbian futurity.

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CHAPTER 1. Introduction: The Lesbian in Queer Times

I attended a roundtable titled ‘Lesbian Studies in Queer Times’ at the 2015 36th annual National Women’s Studies Association Conference. Susan Lanser, historian, kicked off the panel by observing that while that year's conference had 14 panels on queer studies, there were only 2 panels on lesbian studies. She shared some remarks, including that lesbian, which was once intimately associated with feminist thought, has become a ‘precarious term in the LGBTIQ acronym.’ This was news to me at the time. The presenters questioned the limitations, and potential, of the ‘lesbian’ in scholarship today. Some of the presenters were purely indifferent to the lesbian’s fate as both a term and a category of identity. One presenter declined to speak to whether she thought there were any ‘positives’ to continued existence of lesbian as a category of sexual identity. Other presenters pointed out what they saw as a disturbing trend of lesbian, woman-specific erasure as result of the privileging of the word ‘queer’, though this has been pointed out since queer theory’s inception. Dr. Susan Lanser, a lesbian herself, shared an anecdote in which she overheard one of her queer studies students whisper to another, aghast, “Why does Dr. Lanser have to call herself a *lesbian*, though?” Is lesbian identity retrograde within contemporary feminist? Is it associated with pathologizing 19th century sexology and the counter-revolutionary unsexy specter of cultural feminism, even at a National Women’s Studies conference?

As the panel continued, it became clear to me that there was more in the air than simply discussing the relevance of lesbian studies as compared with queer studies (which is, at this point, predominant in scholarship on gender and sexuality). It was the notion of

lesbian itself, the word, the historical concept that some seemed to fear had reached its expiration date.

It had not been long before 2015 that I came out as a lesbian and yet, I was witnessing people-- academics, feminists-- debate the scholarly pros and cons of lesbian identification, as if *lesbian* was over or at least on the brink of it. I will admit, it was a 'Twilight Zone' moment for me (it was so strange to me, so surprising) until I began to catch insinuations and remarks from feminist and queer identified individuals concerning their preference for queer over lesbian. 'Why do you call yourself a lesbian?' 'Why can't you just say queer?' And so on. There was the insinuation that lesbian (as an identity, a concept) is not compatible with the revolutionary political project of queer (as an identity, a concept). Identifying as queer appeared to be preferred. It was framed, almost, as a prerogative. This sensibility is not shared in all queer spaces, of course. Later, I became project director of The Country: Lexington's First Lesbian Bar oral history project, which focuses on a women's bar, The Country, that close during the early 1980s in Lexington, Kentucky. This sensibility ('Why can't you just say queer') was not present among the women interviewed for the project. These women were quite adamant about being lesbians, and some were even adamant about *not* using the word queer. However, perhaps the greatest example of insistence on a lesbian label, despite outside pressures not to do so, is the small group of individuals on Tumblr who began identifying as *nonbinary lesbians* during 2016 onward.

Nonbinary lesbian denotes individuals who identify as both lesbian and nonbinary or, as I later explore, identifying with the ethos and nomenclature of *both* queer and lesbian. This new term of sexual/gender identity cropped up on the internet sometime

around 2016. This may seem uncommon to the uninitiated, especially considering the word ‘lesbian’ tends to be defined as an individual who is a woman and, seemingly in contradiction, nonbinary indicates a gender identity that is not a part of the binary, not woman or man. Typically, nonbinary lesbian denotes the following qualities: exclusive attraction to women, non-binary gender identification, and a feeling of connection, however complex and tenuous, with womanhood. In sum: a nonbinary lesbian is not a woman, and, still yet, is erotically and emotionally *aligned* with women. Breaking down the term, ‘nonbinary’ is statement of gender identity and a disavowal of the gender binary (“I am not a woman, or a man, I am nonbinary”), and ‘lesbian’ is a simultaneous statement of sexual orientation *and* broader existential affinity (“I am attracted to women and feel some broader connection with women too”).

Nonbinary lesbian identity straddles two different subjects, respectively, the postmodern subject and the modern subject, by combining nonbinary, a term whose direct antecedent, genderqueer, hails from queer zines of the 1990s, and lesbian, an older term born from more essentialist and medicalized discourses of the 19th and 20th centuries. Whereas academics were debating the utility of the word *lesbian* at the 2015 36th annual National Women’s Studies Association Conference, about that same time, or just after, young queer individuals online were combining lesbian with more queer, fluid concepts of identity that evade strict definition (nonbinary) to create new terms that they felt better described their identity and experience.

Indubitably, I became fascinated. While discussions of nonbinary lesbian identity could be found elsewhere on the internet, they were most prominent on Tumblr, the microblogging social media platform, which is quite popular among youth, especially

queer-identified youth. My experiences with largely academic queer hesitancy, or even distaste, toward the term lesbian, combined with discovering one strand of nonbinary lesbian subculture on Tumblr, informed my awareness there was *something* to this. As Sarah Ahmed puts it in *Living a Feminist Life*, one can think of living life as collecting data. She argues that “living one’s life as a lesbian” gives “plenty of data”.¹ Lesbians, Ahmed writes, “know a lot about obstruction” as they collect “information about institutions that govern the reproduction of life.”² The experiences of disbelief and querying lesbians persistently face simply walking through everyday life, Ahmed asserts, constitute data. Inspired by Ahmed’s notion of living as data collection, I have disclosed a very small sample of my encounters with (feminist) skepticism about lesbian identity to reveal the emotional investments that have guided my intellectual questions in this project. While my lived experience is not the data that this dissertation focuses on, it is what led me to my dissertation topic in the first place.

This project aims to examine nonbinary lesbian identity as a historical formation that embraces the lesbian alongside the queer in equal enthusiasm. There has been a cultural shift, a shift away from binaric gender, and the formation nonbinary lesbian identity evidences the continued need (for some) to express specificity of desire. I explore the advent of nonbinary lesbian identity as a specifically lesbian post-gender, supplanted by discursive strategies that rely on concepts of community safety and validation, and a hybrid of different elements from both modern/lesbian and postmodern/nonbinary models

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 214.

² Ahmed, 215.

of identity. Additionally, I explore the temporal aspects of nonbinary lesbianism, especially the way that it combines nostalgia (lesbian) and futurity (queerness) to convey unique positionalities and alignments.

I frame the nonbinary lesbian phenomenon as a case study of the endurance of the lesbian in queer times, and the continued utility of the word ‘lesbian’ as a means of expressing specific desires, including desire for connection. I agree with Katie King’s vision of lesbianism as a shifting construction in the feminist movement. King posits, “There is not ‘lesbianism’ but rather many ‘lesbianisms’ and similarly many ‘lesbians.’ The one word situates a number of constructions, each bound in a specific moment, a political moment, a moment in time and place.”³ Nonbinary lesbian identity is, likewise, a construction bound in a specific political moment, time, and place. As such, it can reveal more about lesbian identity in this current political moment than any of Tumblr’s other freshly coined labels. While there are a litany of new gender and sexual identity labels being coined on Tumblr, most of them do not pertain to lesbian specificity. Furthermore, even those that do pertain, it has only been the nonbinary lesbian label (as explored in Chapter 4) that has been debated more thoroughly by individuals both inside and outside of LGBTQ communities. Nonbinary lesbian identity stand at the crossroads of modern and postmodern identity constructs, engaging in contradictions and ambiguities for the sake of authentic self-expression. What does this demonstrate about the evolution of lesbian identity, particularly as lesbian bars continue to close around the United States? In fact, what does this demonstrate about evolutions in gender and sexual

³ Katie King, *Theory in Its Feminist Travels : Conversations in U.S. Women’s Movements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 136.

identity, more broadly? Scholarship has long noted the formation and iterations of modern sexual identity (meaning, the modern subject). Scholarship has also long noted the formation and iterations of postmodern sexual identity (referring to the deconstruction of the modern subject, and proposition of less measurable postmodern subject that lacks essentialist tethers). As we move further into the 2020s, we must consider that the “postmodern subject”, or even the broad concept of “queer” is the most accurate and enlightened endpoint of our considerations of gender and sex, and that indeed notions will continue to evolve as these concepts, similarly to that of the modern subject or Foucault’s homosexual ‘species’, will continue to shift and evolve with time. Nonbinary lesbian identity, I argue, represents a stepping stone in the direction of where ‘we’ are headed. As such, nonbinary lesbian identity—its supplanting discursive strategies, the legacy of broader lesbian identity that it stands upon—is vital for understanding changing contemporary notions of the self, of experience, and of specificity.

This dissertation explores this question by comparing and contrasting the discursive practices and strategies of nonbinary lesbians on Tumblr with those of women who once converged at The Country, a women’s bar that closed during the early 1980s in Lexington, Kentucky. How are community boundaries delineated in material lesbian space versus digital lesbian space? What discursive strategies are relied upon to legitimate lesbian identity? In order to answer these questions, this dissertation engages in computer-mediated discourse analysis of over 1,600 Tumblr posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag from 2016-2020, and places those posts in conversation with the oral history accounts of 14 women who used to frequent The Country. Overall, this dissertation identifies the former as part of a lesbian digital space, and the latter as a

lesbian material space, drawing commonalities between the two concerning themes of desire, safety, authenticity, and validity. I rely on a queer methodology of oral history to underscore the subjectivity and personal narratives of the interviews, hoping to provide insight into lesbian and queer discourses of identity. I also focus on notions of lesbian gender, the ways the architecture of space (digital and material) inform community sensibility, and the primacy of safety, comfort, belonging, and desire (of all kinds) toward women in different lesbian communities.

This introduction includes a necessary overview of background concepts (the definition and recent history of nonbinary lesbian identity, and the general structure of Tumblr), literature review, methods explication, and a chapter outline.

Defining the Nonbinary Lesbian

Indications of a potential period of origin and ascendance of at least discussion or inference of nonbinary lesbian identity can be found using Google Trends, a webtool by Google that analyzes and tracks search queries. Google Trends charts the first instances of measurable search interest in nonbinary lesbian in late 2014. More frequent search interest begins during 2017 and continues, despite alternating peaks and falls, to overall rise into significance into the 2020s. The search had notable spikes during June of 2020 and January of 2021. Google Trends notes that users searching for nonbinary lesbian also searched for the following related topics: genderqueer, flag (official symbol variety), and gender binary. The related topics are quite appropriate. Genderqueer is the antecedent of nonbinary, user made pride flags figure heavily into discussions of nonbinary lesbian identity online (see more in Chapter 3), and the gender binary is very relevant to an identity that both embraces and rebukes different aspects of the gender binary.

Google Ngram Viewer, a search engine that graphs the frequencies of phrases in Google’s text corpus of sources printed between 1500 and 2019, does not show any results for the phrase “nonbinary lesbian” in its collection.⁴ This is hardly surprising considering the term was coined within the past decade and lacks widespread awareness, sometimes even within a queer context. Google Ngram Viewer does show results for simply “nonbinary”, as it relates to the contemporary understanding of nonbinary gender identity, throughout the 2010s.⁵ There are, as expected, a myriad of results for “lesbian” across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.⁶

At the time of this writing, there are a few definitions of nonbinary lesbian proffered by queer online resources. Most the resources on nonbinary lesbian identity available are popular LGBTQ-related websites. Among the LGBTQ-related websites that discuss nonbinary lesbian identity, I have selected the three most prominent: Nonbinary Wiki, LGBTQA Wikia, and Queer Undefined, which as of this writing are the top three results when searching for “nonbinary lesbian” on Google. All three websites assemble crowdsourced definitions for terminology related to gender and sexual identity.

Considering the nonbinary lesbian concept emerged from the internet, crowdsourced

⁴ “Google Ngram Viewer: Nonbinary Lesbian,” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed April 18, 2021, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=%22nonbinary+lesbian%22&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=.

⁵ “Google Ngram Viewer:Nonbinary,” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed April 18, 2021, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=nonbinary+gender&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cnonbinary%20gender%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cnonbinary%20gender%3B%2Cc0.

⁶ “Google Ngram Viewer: Lesbian,” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed April 18, 2021, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=lesbian&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Clesbian%3B%2Cc0.

internet definitions seem appropriate for providing some context. Nonbinary Wiki and LGBTQA Wikia follow an online encyclopedic format (like Wikipedia), featuring full articles, and Queer Undefined functions as an online dictionary featuring user-submitted definitions. Both LGBTQA Wikia and Queer Undefined aim to act as a resource for those who are questioning (both of their ‘about’ pages use this word).⁷ Nonbinary Wiki is devoted specifically to nonbinary advocacy by providing neutral and “neutral, inclusive, and useful” content to “anyone regardless of gender or culture.”⁸

Nonbinary Wiki mentions nonbinary lesbian along with a number of related terms on its romantic and sexual orientation page under the heading “Usually attracted to women.”⁹ Judging by what I have read, and the research I conducted on Tumblr, nonbinary lesbians express their attraction typically as ‘attracted to women’ *or* ‘attracted to women and other nonbinary lesbians.’ Nonbinary lesbian, specifically, is placed within the lesbian section, sandwiched in between “gynephilia” and “NBLW” (an acronym for Nonbinary People Loving Women). Nonbinary Wiki defines lesbians as people who “simply put [...] are usually women who feel attraction to other women.” However, this recognizable definition changes as the paragraph continues to describe the ways, currently and historically, that some lesbians have experienced or displayed gender nonconformity. “Some see ‘lesbian’ as their gender identity as well as their sexuality,”

⁷ “Welcome to the LGBTQA Wiki,” LGBTQA Wiki, accessed April 18, 2021, https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/LGBTQA_Wiki; “Queer Undefined: About,” Queer Undefined: A Crowdsourced LGBTQ+ Dictionary, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.queerundefined.com/about>.

⁸ “Nonbinary Wiki: About,” Nonbinary Wiki, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://nonbinary.wiki/m/te>.

⁹ “Nonbinary Wiki: Romantic and Sexual Orientation,” Nonbinary Wiki, accessed April 18, 2021, https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Romantic_and_sexual_orientation.

the article reads. “Lesbians can be cisgender women, transgender women, nonbinary/genderqueer women, and anyone else who feels that their identities align with womanhood or that they have some kind of connection to womanhood.”

The article then goes on to list eight “notable nonbinary lesbians”, some of whom are living celebrities with self-professed nonbinary or genderfluid identities, such as actor Ruby Rose, who at times has claimed a genderfluid identity and a lesbian identity. Other individuals on the list are not celebrities but historical figures who, while they did not specifically ascribe to the term as it did not exist yet, claimed varying gender identities outside of simply ‘woman’ alongside an attraction to women (such as Leslie Feinberg who famously described herself as an “anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist”).¹⁰

Notably, an Internet Wayback Machine screen-capture of this page from July 2016 shows that Nonbinary Wiki, then Nonbinary.org, did not include mention of “nonbinary lesbian” in its sexual orientation terminology at that time.¹¹ This does not mean that nobody was using the term nonbinary lesbian online during 2016 (as my research on the “nonbinary lesbian” Tumblr tag proves), but it does potentially indicate that it was lesser known at this time even within online spaces oriented toward nonbinary identity. This latter aspect is also proven by my research on the “nonbinary lesbian” Tumblr tag, as there were only 16 posts made to that tag in 2016, whereas the years following (2017, 2018, and 2019) demonstrate an increase in post frequency.

¹⁰ Minnie Bruce Pratt, “Leslie Feinberg - A Communist Who Revolutionized Transgender Rights,” *Workers World* (blog), November 18, 2014, <https://www.workers.org/2014/11/16937/>.

LGBTQA Wikia defines a nonbinary lesbian as “a non-binary or genderqueer person who is attracted to women or woman aligned people in a sapphic way and identifies as a lesbian.”¹² This definition differentiates desire between women, or woman aligned people, from desire between other forms of romantic pairings by describing it as ‘sapphic.’ While it is not clear what exactly that means here, though it is a notion that cropped up in numerous posts from the nonbinary lesbian tag, this notion that their (meaning individual nonbinary lesbians) attraction and love for women is ‘lesbian.’ The definition continues to note other related terms, adding that “non-binary lesbians are often (but not necessarily) feminine aligned or fgender, woman aligned or fiaspec, woman-related, girlprox, intrafeminine, or transfeminine.” The article includes six nonbinary lesbian flags created by users. Queer Undefined provides three user-submitted definitions, each which feature a brief bio of the user who submitted.

Tumblr’s Architecture as Digital and Queer Space

Some background to Tumblr is necessary to understanding the data presented by the #nonbinary lesbian posts, as the content of the posts, and the communities tethered between them, relate in many ways to the architecture of Tumblr as a unique digital space that structurally encourages the formation of communities, fandoms, and subcultures. Tumblr, by its very structure, facilitated the accretion of communities and subcultures surrounding *single concepts*. This is accomplished, primarily, through Tumblr’s tagging system. The tag feature on Tumblr, which is a default core feature of the site’s organization, provides digital space for connecting with users with shared interests by

¹² “LGBTQA Wiki: Non-Binary Lesbian,” LGBTQA Wiki, accessed April 18, 2021, https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/Non-Binary_Lesbian.

allowing users to assign keywords to their posts known as ‘tags’. Tumblr permits all users above 18 (age is determined by birthdate entry when an individual creates an account) from viewing all tags. Users ages 13 and below are not permitted to view tags or content that has been flagged as ‘explicit’ by fellow users and/or Tumblr staff. Tags are always preceded by a hashtag, not unlike Twitter. Say User A is posting about coming out as gay, or reviewing a lesbian romance movie, they might add the tag #lesbian to their post to reach other people who choose to post to and browse the lesbian tag. If another user, User B, happened to be browsing #lesbian at that time, User B would see User A’s post at the top of the #lesbian page, as it would be the most recent post made to the tag. Then, scrolling down, User B would be able to browse all preceding posts that different users made with the lesbian tag in reverse chronological order. Furthermore, whenever a user attaches tag to their post, or mentions that word within the body of their post, that post also becomes visible to any Tumblr user on that keyword search basis (unless the blog is set to private or has been deleted). This feature, and others, shape and are shaped by the culture(s) of Tumblr’s userbase.

By fixing metadata to posts and making posts text searchable, Tumblr’s tagging system allows users to browse posts pertaining to specified content, or special interests. This elemental feature of Tumblr’s interface allows for communities of users to accrete around tags relevant to their interests. For instance, whenever a user decides that they would like to browse content related to their favorite movie, they can simply type in the title of that movie and visit the tag, or posts that mention the title. This browsability applies to users seeking to browse content related to different gender and sexual identities. This can and does include any number of terminologies, from more specific

labels, such as bisexual or trans, to broader terminologies such as LGBTQ or queer. There are also users who have sought to browse or post content related to nonbinary lesbian identity, as evidenced by the #nonbinary lesbian post body data this dissertation builds on.

Literature Review

This dissertation relates to multiple fields of study, including lesbian and queer identities, lesbian oral history, and work about participatory subcultures. I review the literature most relevant to this dissertation within these fields, as well as additional scholarship that is key to the perspective and approach of this dissertation.

The relationship between lesbian and queer

Scholars have argued that feminism in the United States “ceased to consider the feminine subject as the center of its politics” during the 1990s.¹³ During this shift, lesbian feminism, which centered gender-essentialist identity politics, became no longer synonymous with feminism, as it once had been for some during the heyday of lesbian feminism. Scholarship on potential schisms and alliances between lesbian and queer concepts is instrumental to this dissertation. I see this project as joining and adding to that conversation.

Arlene Stein, historian, speaks about communities whose politics privilege sexual identification in “The Incredible Shrinking Lesbian World and Other Queer Conundra.”

¹³ Norma Mogrovejo, “The Latin American Lesbian Movement: Its Shaping and Its Search for Autonomy,” in *Provocations: A Transnational Leader in the History of Feminist Thought* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 314.

Stein examines the state of lesbian identity politics, noting contemporary claims from others that lesbian subcultures are dying out (such as the closure of lesbian bars, which continues to this day). She argues that we are witnessing the “exhaustion” of a specific historical construct of individuals as defined primarily by their sexuality. This would include, of course, lesbians. Stein observes that an identity politic that privilege sexual identification “can only function smoothly if it prioritizes one identity above all others. Once you introduce multiplicity and fluidity into the mix, loyalties become divided, and boundaries blurred.”¹⁴ Stein relates this analysis of the politics of specificity to lesbian communities with “today’s emergent categories” of gender and sexual identity which “are much more fine-tuned, combining sexual preference, gender presentation, and other modes of identification.”¹⁵ Stein considers the potential for lesbian to integrate with queer, speculating that new, emerging forms of lesbian identity will proliferate and evolve in the coming years. Indeed, that future is already here, and has been for several years now. This dissertation builds on Stein’s prediction regarding the evolution of lesbian identity, showcasing nonbinary lesbian identity as a blatant lesbian merger with queer and a hybrid construction that combines gender identity, sexual preference, with conjoined indications of specificity (through lesbian) and lack of specificity (through nonbinary). This project departs from Stein in that it considers the way queer modes of identity (as multiple, as fluid) may not fully meet the needs of those who do desire some aspect of partial specificity.

¹⁴ Arlene Stein, “The Incredible Shrinking Lesbian World and Other Queer Conundra,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 1 (2010): 27.

¹⁵ Stein, 28.

Elizabeth Freeman also attends to the sometimes-troubled relationship between lesbians and lesbian feminism with queer and queer politics via her concept of “temporal drag” in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*.¹⁶ Freeman uses this term to indicate the gravitational pull that ‘lesbian’ and ‘lesbian feminist’ seems to exert on ‘queer’. She refers to this as a deadweight that hearkens “back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women’s sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of color, the working class, and the transgendered.”¹⁷ Queer theory privileges, she writes, “transformative differences not only across gender” but also “in the name of a radical future.”¹⁸ Freeman relates this pattern more so as a temporal phenomenon, rather than a matter of “group identity.”¹⁹

Freeman also considers the relationship between queer performativity (queer iterations of gender and sexuality that eschew normative or binaric understanding) and time. She describes the way Judith Butler conceptualizes the relationship between queer performativity and time as “basically progressive, insofar as repetitions with a difference hold the most promise.”²⁰ Freeman posits that the way Butler privileges the future in the relationship between time and queer performativity is “symptomatic of late finance capitalism before the crashes of the early twenty-first century” and that the result of these

¹⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 62.

¹⁷ Freeman, 62.

¹⁸ Freeman, 62.

¹⁹ Freeman, 62.

²⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2010), 62.

temporal formulations can be that whatever is “more-radical-than-thou has more purchase over prior signs” and that whatever “seems to generate continuity is better left behind.”²¹ This project relies on Freeman’s concept of temporal drag and her insistence on the relevance of temporality to queerness generally, particularly as it relates to combining lesbian with nonbinary within constructs of nonbinary lesbian identity. This project departs from Freeman by examining the sign of the lesbian (within the nonbinary lesbian context) as imbuing a future-oriented allegiance toward women, complicating, in part, Freeman’s understanding of the lesbian’s relationship with queer constituting temporal drag rather than futurity.

Queer and lesbian oral history

This work relies on the narratives in the oral histories of lesbian and queer women who went to The Country, a women’s bar and lesbian and queer community space in Lexington, Kentucky from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, to further illuminate notions of community building and values contained in the Tumblr post set. This is done to highlight aspects of the evolution of different varieties of lesbian genders, different contests and tensions in lesbian subjectivities, and more. I treat the oral histories as individuated insight into the personal narratives of some lesbian and queer women. While this dissertation is not a ‘oral history monograph,’ it does significantly feature the narratives of oral histories. This project’s understanding of oral histories, their utility, and

²¹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2010), 63.

how to approach them is reliant on past studies and scholarship done on oral histories with queer and lesbian individuals.

First, I must mention Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeleine Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) and Esther Newton's *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (1993), both foundation works in queer oral history. Kennedy and Davis relied on oral history to reconstruct the culture of working-class lesbians in 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s Buffalo, New York. Kennedy and Davis prove the utility of oral history to lesbian history. They also consider changes in conceptions of lesbianism overtime, another feature that this dissertation also considers. Specifically, Kennedy and Davis track the way women's perspectives on lesbianism changed from concepts of lesbianism as deriving from more 'masculine' gender presentation during earlier decades, to definitions based on sexual behavior (meaning, all women who desired other women were lesbians regardless of their masculinity or lack thereof) during later decades.²² The concepts of changing lesbian genders and evolving lesbianisms are instrumental to this project. Also critical to this project is Newton's *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*. Newton conducts a cultural history of gay men and lesbians in Cherry Grove, New York to explore the place of the 'LGBT mecca' Cherry Grove in the gay imagination and the development of a national gay culture from the 1930s then beyond the mid-twentieth century.²³ Like Kennedy and Davis, Newton also relies on (in addition to other methods and forms of research) oral histories to elucidate these features of gay

²² Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madelein D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²³ Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

and lesbian community building. Newton's work demonstrates the historical contingency of gay and lesbian identity, and the evolution of different sensibilities across different time periods and social settings. Both these foundational works of oral history bolster this project's approach to oral history.

A more recent work important to this dissertation is *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* by queer theorists and oral historians Horacio N. Roque Ramirez and Nan Alamilla Boyd. Ramirez and Boyd argue that the subjective perspectives of narrators in oral histories, while not to be taken as factual, do reveal aspects of "their time and place in history."²⁴ For spaces such as The Country, which has been closed since the early 1980s and minimal written record, oral histories are the only accounts of The Country's existence. The lack of a written record is an issue that plagues the histories of lesbian communities, as compared with the histories of communities of gay men. Histories of gay male communities have relied heavily on evidence provided by police reports and court records. Due to comparative lack of legal persecution of lesbians, histories of lesbian communities have had to be creative in order to find primary resources. Rebecca Jennings, historian of British lesbian history, laments this in "Lesbian Voices: The Hall Carpenter Oral History Archive and Post-war British Lesbian History", another work important to this dissertation. Jennings writes:

[...] the issue of a paucity of sources, which has plagued all attempts at broadening the focus of traditional western historiography, has been particularly significant in lesbian history and posed some methodological difficulties in this work. While research into gay male communities and oppression has relied heavily upon evidence provided by court records and police reports on the

²⁴ Horacio N. Roque Ramirez and Nan Alamilla Boyd, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

activities of homosexual suspects, the absence of any coherent attempt at legal persecution of lesbians, largely due to a devaluing of female experience, has denied lesbian historians this source of evidence. With few exceptions, historians have been unable to locate first-hand accounts of 'lesbian' experiences, with the result that the only evidence relating to female homosexuality has tended to take the form of mainstream masculine dominated discourses. In work on the late 20th century, oral history can offer one means of confronting this difficulty [...]"²⁵

This is the case, too, with the record of queer women in Lexington Kentucky, where The Country was located. Records of queer men in Lexington exceed those of queer women in Lexington queer history. The work of Jennings, Ramirez, and Boyd help to justify oral histories as providing insight into history, and of oral histories of lesbian and queer women being important for fleshing out records and narratives of lesbian identity overtime.

Internet Subcultures

Henry Jenkins' work on fandom culture has deeply influenced my approach to Tumblr as a computer-mediated, participatory youth subculture in which participants circulate ideologies that fulfill specific cultural agendas. Tumblr is home to a range of youth subcultures, which are participatory in nature. Tumblr is rife with fanfiction, fanart, blogs devoted to fandoms, and more. Henry Jenkins coined the term 'participatory subculture' to describe the "social interactions of fan communities" that are uniquely different from "the activities of fans from other forms of spectatorship."²⁶ Jenkins applies his concept of 'participatory culture' to fandoms, or subcultures of fans who experience

²⁵ Rebecca Jennings, "Lesbian Voices: The Hall Carpenter Oral History Archive and Post-War British Lesbian History," *Sexualities* 7, no. 4 (2004): 431, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460704047061>.

²⁶ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 2.

camaraderie over their shared interest in a film, television show, book, etcetera. Likewise, I apply the concept of participatory culture to the users who post to the nonbinary lesbian tag.

I look to the example of previous theses and dissertations about internet subcultures, which have noted the limitations of independent close readings, as it relates to digital materials selected. Aaron Moses Dishy states, in “Swallowing Misandry: A Survey of the Discursive Strategies of r/TheRedPill on Reddit”, that independent close reading can “lead to deficits in understanding how frequently metaphors and mechanisms are distributed”.²⁷ Jessica Hartl Majcher, in “Social Justice and Citizen Participation on Tumblr”, notes that the materials she collected for analysis were collected across an arbitrary two week period, thus the resulting data acted as “a snapshot of a particular time and context” rather than a representation of “Tumblr user activities across time.”²⁸ This dissertation is not built on the assumption that the materials analyzed are stable, but it has taken measures to ensure further accuracy, including taking a collection for analysis from a wider time range than previous studies of Tumblr, such as Majcher’s. I assert that materials and resulting observations are indicative of my analysis of a particular subculture, as read from a specific tag. Similarly to the way the discourse of oral histories of lesbian and queer women may provide insight into different lesbian and queer community building practices and values, the discourse of my set of Tumblr posts may

²⁷ Aaron M. Dishy, “Swallowing Misandry: A Survey of the Discursive Strategies of r/TheRedPill on Reddit” (University of Toronto, 2018), 22, TSpace, <https://hdl.handle.net/1807/97663>.

²⁸ Jessica H. Majcher, “Social Justice and Citizen Participation on Tumblr: Examining the Changing Landscape of Social Activism in the Digital Era” (Graduate College of Bowling Green State University, 2017), 34, http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1510428529403768.

also provide insight into different lesbian and queer community building practices and values. This project's materials for analysis consist of a range of digital text with varying dates of publication.

Methods

I rely on two methods to elucidate predominant themes and discursive strategies, as well as the relationship between space and community, surrounding nonbinary lesbian identity on Tumblr. My data set, similarly, is also dual pronged: a corpus of over 1,600 posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr, and a series of 14 oral history interviews conducted with lesbian and queer women who used to frequent The Country. First, I will explain how I gathered my Tumblr posts, how I coded them, and what methods I have relied to analyze these posts.

I used TumblrThree, a free open-source application by Github user johanneszab, to extract and download all data for every post that was tagged with “nonbinary lesbian” from 2016 – 2020.²⁹ This span of five years amounted to a 1,639 post set. TumblrThree downloads the following aspects of data from each post: the date and time the post was made, all tags attached to the post, the number of reblogs and likes that post received, the username and URL of the author of the post (popularly known as “OP” or “original poster” online), the post URL, and the content of the post in HTML format. Looking at the data, each year demonstrates an increase in posts tagged with nonbinary lesbian. In 2016 there were only 16 posts, then in 2017 there were 103 posts, 2018 there were 332 posts, 2019 there were 493 posts, and finally during 2020 there were 695 posts. I loaded

²⁹ *TumblrThree - A Tumblr Blog Backup Application*, C# (2018; repr., TumblrThreeApp, 2021), <https://github.com/TumblrThreeApp/TumblrThree>.

my post set into the notes application Evernote and used their interface to, as I read through each post, attach tags to each post according to vocabulary used (such as usage of different gender and sexual identity terms) and frequent topics of discussion (such as dysphoria and top surgery). I used these tags with the intent of defining and tracking what is visible in the post set.

After I did this preliminary tagging, reading and assessing each post in chronological order to get a sense of nonbinary lesbian's momentum across five years, I started again. This time I did quality control to make sure all my vocabulary tags and subject tags were accurate (for example, that all the posts I tagged as mentioning biological sex had done so, and that it was no interpretive mistake on my part). Then I passed through the posts a third time and created the following broader categories that encapsulate all of my vocabulary and subject tags: posts that pertain to and/or include Gender and Sexual Identity, Gender Expression, Gender Identity, Sexual/Romantic Orientation, Pronouns, and User Creations. I explain these categories, and their contents, at length in Chapter 3.

The method that I applied to the Tumblr posts is that of computer-mediated close discourse analysis (CDA). I will establish the precise definition of close discourse analysis that I rely on, then I augment that understanding with a form of CDA for the digital age, computer-mediated close discourse analysis (CMDA). In sum, I rely on the concept of language as social practice, and of close discourse analysis (CDA) as a method for highlighting social practices. Adrian Blackledge, scholar of sociolinguistics, makes use of CDA to draw out the underlying dominant racial ideologies from the discourse of British politicians and policy makers in *Discourse and Power in a*

Multilingual World (2005). Blackledge argues that discursive practices “should be regarded as both structured and structuring actions”, clarifying that discourse is “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned.”³⁰ This project adopts a similar perspective on discourse and applies that perspective to a body of posts pertaining to nonbinary lesbian identity in order to identify the potential ideologies that undergird nonbinary lesbian’s place in contemporary gender and sexual identity contests.

CDA, however, is often applied to fixed, stable texts. The internet is not a fixed, stable medium—and this includes Tumblr. As such, this project’s critical discourse approach must accommodate the complexities of unstable, multimodal digital media. CMDA is more specific to a digital context than CDA, and is the approach that this project takes to analyzing text and images from the nonbinary lesbian tag. Susan Herring outlines the underlying theoretical assumptions of CMDA as a methodological toolkit in her piece “Computer-mediated discourse analysis” (2004). According to Herring, CMDA assumes that discourse exhibits recurrent patterns, and that patterns may not be “immediately obvious to the casual observer or toward the participants themselves.”³¹ CMDA also assumes that discourse involves speaker choice, and that these choices reflect cognitive and social factors. CMDA, setting itself apart from CDA, further assumes that computer-mediated discourse “may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems.”³² (Herring 343)

³⁰ Adrian Blackledge, *Discourse and Power in a Multilingual World* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 4.

³¹ Susan Herring, “Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Communities,” in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 342.

³² Herring, 343.

This aspect of CMDA is particularly relevant to my dissertation, as it acknowledges that computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not necessarily, shaped by the digital structure of computer mediated communication systems (in this case, Tumblr). This project's methodology relies extensively on the methodological toolkit of CDA and CMDA.

The second data set that this dissertation relies on is a series of semi-structured oral history interviews with 14 lesbian and queer-identified women that used to go to The Country. These oral histories were conducted within the scope of a grant-funded oral history project, *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, throughout 2020. The sample was formed through 'snowball' sampling through networks of friendships and appeals posted to the social media pages and official website of the Faulkner Morgan Archive, different local LGBTQ+ Facebook groups, and mailed out to the Faulkner Morgan Archive e-mail list.

The goal of the project was to collect the oral histories of women who experienced The Country to shed light on the broader narrative of queer women in Kentucky in the 1970s and 1980s. The second goal of the project, equally important to the first, was to make those oral histories accessible to the public. The Kentucky Oral History Commission generously funded the project through their 2020-2021 project grant cycle. The Faulkner Morgan Archive, an archive exclusively devoted to Kentucky's LGBTQ+ story, provided financial support as well as institutional backing. I acted as Project Director, locating interviewees, and conducting extensive oral history interviews with 14 women. *The Country's* project advisor, Dr. Jonathan Coleman, who has written extensively on the queer history of Kentucky, provided significant counsel, labor, and

support as the co-founder of the Faulkner Morgan Archive. The Faulkner Morgan Archive even hosted a one-night reunion for The Country, which I co-hosted, and invited project interviewees and broader Lexington queer communities to celebrate the legacy of The Country. This reunion took place at the Lexington Diner, a lesbian-owned restaurant only a couple doors down from where The Country used to be located on Lane Allen Road. Interviewees enjoyed free food and drinks, and the company of others who either used to go to The Country or those who simply were interested in The Country's legacy. This event was done for both promotional purposes and to give back to the interviewees, who were not financially compensated for their interviews. All but one interviewee attended the event, as she lives too far away from Kentucky to make the travel.

At the conclusion of the project, the interviews were deposited at two repositories, the Kentucky Historical Society and the Faulkner Morgan Archive. All interviewees signed off on a deed of gift agreement for both repositories. These agreements gifted the property and copyright of the recorded interviews to the archives. The deed of gift agreements provided the opportunity for interviewees to request access restrictions, however, none of the interviewees requested access restrictions. None of the interviewees requested anonymity, or the use of pseudonyms. The Faulkner Morgan Archive and the Kentucky Historical Society have the express consent of the interviewees to use the recorded interviews, and the information within them, in any way they see fit. I also have the expressed consent of all the interviewees to "unrestricted use" of the recorded interviews and the information within them, as both agreements specifically stated that the gift also permitted unrestricted use by myself as an individual if I ever wanted to write about the interviews in my work. This includes permission to quote from

or even publish recordings from the interviews. Since these interviews were conducted distinctly as oral histories, with interviewees volunteering their unique perspective on The Country women's bar, under the purview of a grant-funded project with the specific mission of collecting individual stories, and not conducted for the intention of comparing and contrasting, these interviews constitute oral histories and therefore are not subject to IRB review. All interviewees filled out a post-interview survey, in which they shared their experience of the interview process and reflected on the meaning of *The Country* oral history project. The interviews generally lasted between one hour up to three hours, depending on the amount of time the interviewee had to spare.

Appropriately, the second method that this project relies on is that of oral history methodology. I compare and contrast my findings from the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag, as related to matters of lesbian identity and community construction, in a series of oral history interviews with lesbian and queer women, in which they discuss the foundation and their experience of The Country, a women's bar and lesbian and queer community space in Lexington, Kentucky from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. The perspectives in the oral histories are used to further illuminate notions of community building and values contained in the post set, and to highlight aspects of the evolution of different varieties of lesbian genders. Oral history has been an indispensable methodology for scholars, particularly historians of queer history, who are not infrequently limited to legal and medical records as source material. These records, while informative, may not offer individuated insight into the perspectives and experiences of different gender and sexual minorities.

My approach to interpreting oral histories, as sources with distinctively subjective and ephemeral qualities, relies on a queer methodology as proposed by Kevin Murphy, Jennifer Pierce, and Jason Ruiz in “What Makes Queer Oral History Different” (2016). The authors argue that oral history is best understood “as a queer methodology and as a method that shares a genealogy with queer studies and politics.” The authors rely on oral historian Alessandro Portelli’s foundational defense of oral history sources as uniquely valuable precisely for their subjectivity and instability to argue that the core, most valuable traits of oral histories have queer resonance. The authors agree with Portelli’s characterization of oral histories as “uniquely positioned to get at the productive conflicts and contradictions that constitute modern subjectivities”, and also agree with the Foucauldian approach to discourse as narrative and practice, arguing that this makes a queer methodology of oral history especially useful in research regarding gender and sexual identities and other related concepts. Ultimately Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz conclude that, while never neutral or unbiased, oral histories are valid historical texts for research that provide a record of and insight into personal narratives, and that a queer methodology that highlights the multiplicity, contradictions, and subjectivity of personal narratives is well-suited for conducting queer oral history.

I rely on this framework of oral history, as historically valuable for being ephemeral and subjective, in order to interpret the narratives embedded in the personal accounts of lesbians and queen women who went to The Country. I do not take these oral histories as objective data but, rather, I take them as informative of the personal narratives embedded within the discourse of the individuals interviewed. Like Portinelli, I agree that oral histories are positioned advantageously for shedding light on the conflicts

that constitute subjectivities. I aim to elucidate the peculiarities and contradictions that constitute the modern gender and sexual subjectivities expressed in the discourse of *The Country* oral history project interviews. Like Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz, I also agree that oral histories are ongoing and incomplete by their nature. My interviewees spoke from a place of both having been to The Country during the 1970s and 1980s and living as lesbian and queer women up into the year 2020. Therefore, I consider these oral histories to act as both histories of personal narratives of the past, but also of the present in which they were recorded.

Race/Class and Lesbian Identity

This dissertation examines two lesbian spaces, The Country, a material space, and the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag from 2016 to 2020, a digital space. While The Country no longer exists as a material space at present, it does exist within the minds and memories of the women who went there. The Country was a space in which race was in fact highly visible. All interviewees remarked that it was a ‘mostly’ white space.’ While some interviewees recalled there being individuals in the broader social group who were of color, who came to The Country, other interviewees do not recall seeing a single person of color there. In terms of class, the interviewees remarked that there were blue collar women who went to The Country, and some white collar. Contrastingly, the class and racial dynamics of the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag are much more ambiguous. I do not know the class or racial makeup of those who posted to the tag. There are some users who posted selfies to the tag, but not enough to make any secure statements regarding race and nonbinary lesbian identity. Potentially, one could make a study of the classed

and raced aesthetics of the styling and framing of these selfies (since there were a number of selfies), but this dissertation does not embark upon that study.

The lack of information pertaining directly to class and race regarding the Tumblr post set creates some limitations for the broader applicability of my data. This is unfortunate, considering there is prodigious scholarship on the impact of race and class on lesbian identity. More broadly, Linda Garber considers how work of working-class lesbians / lesbians of color contributed significantly to the formation of queer theory, as they articulated multiple, simultaneous identity positions, in *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*.³³ In terms of race, class, and lesbian *gender*, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeleine Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, which I already noted, argue that there were race and class factors in the ways women's perspectives on lesbianism changed from concepts of lesbianism as deriving from more 'masculine' gender presentation during earlier decades, to definitions based on sexual behavior. Estelle Freedman analyzes the stereotype of the aggressive lesbian, and the ways that classist and racist notions of hyper sexuality and criminality in women of color were mired in its gendered construction in "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965."³⁴ Maria Valenti discusses class and race as factors in lesbian gender identity development among young black women in her 2011 dissertation, arguing that the femmes and stemmes she interviewed reflected young black female gender norms, whereas the studs reflected

³³ Garber, Linda. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

³⁴ Freedman, Estelle B. "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 397-423.

young black male gender norms.³⁵ Overall, decades of scholarship has demonstrated that the intersection of race, class, and gender are highly pertinent to gender and sexual identity construction and expression. I have no doubt this is also the case for nonbinary lesbian identity, but I will leave it to future studies, with more thorough class and race information regarding nonbinary lesbians, to take that on.

Conclusion

This dissertation aims to examine lesbian identity as constantly evolving, by putting lesbians and queer women from The Country in conversation with the discourse of nonbinary lesbians on Tumblr. This dissertation considers nonbinary lesbian identity as a historical formation that arises amid tensions and overlaps between lesbian and queer identity constructions. There are many different lesbians. How do modes of doing lesbian gender and community practices relate to the space they are contained within? How has the lesbian evolved into queer times, and what can we make of these changes?

Chapter 2 offers an overview of The Country, as a queer and lesbian material space. Then, I make observations about recurring themes and discursive strategies embedded in the personal narratives of the oral histories of lesbians and queer women who went to The Country. Specifically, I focus on concepts of community building, community values such as safety and authenticity, and lesbian gender. I also consider the ways material space both shapes and is shaped by queer and lesbian community building practices.

³⁵ Valenti, Maria. "Lesbian Gender Identity Development and Gender Roles of Young Black Women" (Michigan State University, 2011).

Chapter 3 provides further overview of queer and feminists aspects of Tumblr content, then launches into an analysis of a body of over 1,600 posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag from 2016 to 2020. I outline the overarching themes and discursive strategies I pulled from the posts using qualitative coding. Then I engage in close readings of exemplar posts from each of the most prominent strategies and topics. I focus on notions of community building, community values such as safety and authenticity, lesbian gender, the perception of conflict between ‘lesbian’ and other queer signifiers, concepts of alignment, and digital forms of gender expression that link identity with fandom. I consider the ways digital space both shapes and is shaped by queer and lesbian community building practices.

In Chapter 4, I bring both my data sets together, The Country oral histories, and the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr posts. I examine the shared qualities between The Country and the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag. In addition, I discuss nonbinary lesbian identity as a lesbian post-gender, one that permits individuals to express specificity of desire within a digital environment, and possibly even an era, that increasingly emphasizes queer ambiguity

In Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, I read popular discourse surrounding lesbian bar closures, highlighting the tension between ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’ are invoked. Then, I consider the continued utility of the term lesbian as the generalized term queer continues to become more prevalent as a means of invoking the specificity of lesbian desire, and the continued relevance of lesbian today as lesbian identity and concepts continue to evolve, with nonbinary lesbian as one instance of that. I end by considering the key points of my

research concerning nonbinary lesbians as well as the limitations of my methods and approach.

CHAPTER 2. “The Only Place We Could Be Ourselves”: Lesbian Desire and the Self at Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar

Social venues have been indispensable to the development of community and activism among marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ community.³⁶ Bars have been a particularly significant social venue for LGBTQ community building, community differentiation, and activism in small and large cities.³⁷ That queer spaces are rendered via queer people has been foundational, for some time now, to the field of geography, particularly of geographies of sexuality.³⁸ David Bell and Gill Valentine, geographers, argue that it is the “presence of queer bodies” that renders a particular location queer.³⁹ John Howard, writing about queer culture in rural America, similarly argues that “place is simultaneously a physical and social phenomenon”, and that it is the people who inhabit space that render space queer, even spaces that one may not typically see as queer, such as a church.⁴⁰ Experience and scholarship has also demonstrated, however, that some queer bodies, that some members of the LGBTQ community, are excluded from queer

³⁶ Christine Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns, Saloons, Speakeasies, and Grog Shops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Greggor Mattson, “Small-City Gay Bars, Big-City Urbanism,” *City & Community* 19 (n.d.): 76–97.

³⁸ Natalie Oswin, “Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space” 32, no. 1 (2008): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132507085213>.

³⁹ David Bell and Gill Valentine, eds., “Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities,” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–27.

⁴⁰ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34.

spaces, such as trans people⁴¹ and people of color.⁴² Scholarship has also been done specifically on the gendered dynamics of queer spaces, including the alienation of some queer cisgender women from mixed queer spaces that tend to cater to queer men, particularly mixed queer bars.⁴³ There is prodigious scholarship differentiates queer space (simply ‘not straight’ space) from lesbian space, such as Catherine Jean Nash’s work on the way trans men experience higher legibility in queer spaces as trans men, versus lesbian spaces where they are sometimes read and treated as butch women.⁴⁴ Depending on conditions of the space, different possibilities (whether they relate to gender, sexuality, race, class, and more) are enabled or disabled.

In this chapter, I discuss oral history interviews as accounts of lesbian experiences of identity and community building within the context of The Country, a women’s bar. I consider the conditions of The Country as a material lesbian space, and explore how those conditions shaped and were shaped by the lesbian communities that converged there. I also consider the most prominent themes of the interviews, which include desire, safety, and authenticity. Additionally, I explore the interviewees’ articulation of lesbian

⁴¹ Jillian Todd Weiss, “GL Vs. BT: The Archaeology of Biphobia and Transphobia within the US Gay and Lesbian Community,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 3, no. 3–4 (2004): 25–55.

⁴² Lina Held, “Comfortable and Safe Spaces?: Gender, Sexuality and ‘Race’ in Night-Time Leisure Spaces,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 14 (2015): 33–42.

⁴³ Jaime Hartless, “‘They’re Gay Bars, but They’re Men Bars’: Gendering Questionably Queer Spaces in a Southeastern US University Town,” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 25, no. 12 (2018): 1781–1800.

⁴⁴ Catherine Jean Nash, “Trans Experiences in Lesbian and Queer Space,” *The Canadian Geographer* 55, no. 2 (2011): 192–207.

gender identity, which stands apart of the ways that nonbinary lesbians articulate their gender identities in my post set

Background to The Country

There is some historical context necessary for understanding the import of The Country and its nature as a women's space, and a lesbian space.

Kentucky was home to a multitude of diverse, queer communities throughout the 20th century. This is particularly true of Lexington, a metropolitan city located in the heart of central Kentucky. Jeffrey Alan Jones, historian, details the history of queer Lexington in his foundational work, "Hidden Histories, Proud Communities: Multiple Narratives in the Queer Geographies of Lexington, Kentucky, 1930-1999" (2001). According to Jones, Lexington housed multiple thriving, diverse, queer-identified communities pre-Stonewall due to the counter-cultural elements of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the Vietnam War Peace movement cultivating an atmosphere among young Lexingtonians in which they could question older views of homosexuality and queerness.⁴⁵ The only published mention of The Country is located in Jones's dissertation. Jones provides an overview of the historical queer geographies of Lexington from 1930 up to the end of the 20th century in 1999. Jones maps out the ways three factors contributed to the development and lifetime of different queer communities, including, the politics of community, the legal construction of queerness (such as 20th century shifts in the legal demarcation between private and public space), and the

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Alan Jones, "Hidden Histories, Proud Communities: Multiple Narratives in the Queer Geographies of Lexington, Kentucky, 1930-1999" (University of Kentucky, 2001), 175, https://saalck-uky.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01SAA_UKY/15remem/alma9918248226802636.

production of space as identified with queer communities. While considering these three developmental aspects, Jones compiles and surveys a variety of different Lexington queer communities, from private drag parties to queer sports leagues. Throughout this overview, Jones himself acknowledges the male slant of the record of queer history in Kentucky. This was how *The Country* oral history project was conceived: as a necessary antidote to the queer woman-shaped gap in the *recorded* queer history of Lexington and the broader state of Kentucky.

Lesbian life during 1930s Lexington is almost completely unrepresented in recorded history, whereas there is some historical record of queer men during that time-period. From at least the 1940s, there were “socially upwardly mobile gay women” who socialized in their homes, not in bars, and their social circle had no crossover with working class or student lesbians. During the 1960s some of these patronized The Gilded Cage, a queer bar that has been open on 224 East Main Street in Lexington, under one name or another, since at least 1962.⁴⁶ While there were straight patrons of The Gilded Cage, the bar was owned by a queer male couple, thus it was widely recognized as a queer space, a space where queer people could socialize while being openly queer, especially queer men. Some queer women socialized there during this time-period, though these women identified as “gay women” rather than as lesbians, as they associated the word with separatists and radical feminists, and the “gay women” patrons of The Gilded Cage engaged in butch-femme relationship models similarly to pre-Stonewall women’s communities in other cities--models that were heavily critiqued by radical

⁴⁶ Jones, 12.

feminists at the time.⁴⁷ The Gilded Cage became The Living Room Restaurant and Bar during 1967. Then, after a fire damaged the property during some renovations in 1973, the bar relocated. Coincidentally, during this time the bar was temporarily relocated to The Carousel, a bar located in the same strip mall on Lane Allen Road as The Country would be a few years later during 1978. The bar returned to its 224 East Main Street location one year later, during 1974, and reopened as Café Montparnasse, a restaurant, on the ground level, with the 2nd and 3rd floors devoted to the bar and night business. Throughout these changes, the clientele continued to be primarily queer. Later changes took place throughout the 70s. During 1976 the owner purchased neighboring properties and adjoined them to the space, creating a 3-story property. Part of this property was converted to a discotheque, as inspired by Studio 54. The bar was renamed Johnny Angel Disco. Then, during 1978, the property owner converted the ground level to a drag showroom, which meant all three floors of the property became devoted exclusively to the bar business. During 1980, the bar changed its name again, this time to The Bar Complex, which remains the property's title to this day.

While The Bar Complex has remained a storied queer location for nearly six decades now, it was a mixed queer space, and decidedly not a women's bar, or a lesbian bar. If anything, the location catered more to gay men. According to my interviewees, this was the precise reason that The Country was founded: in order to provide women a space to socialize with other women. There were few spaces for building community specifically among queer women in Lexington during the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to my interviews, these spaces primarily consisted of house parties with fellow

⁴⁷ Jones, 99.

queer women, women's music events, and sporting events such as local softball matches. Some of my interviewees recall socializing in mixed queer bars, such as the Gilded Cage, which did continue to have some women clientele during the 1970s (as it still does). However, other interviewees expressed that they only rarely went to, or felt comfortable in, those spaces as they felt they were overwhelmingly dominated by men. The Country was founded as a women's bar to fulfill the need for queer women to have a space to talk, dance, and socialize. The Country was first opened by Joyce Baker and Ellen Stewart during 1978 in a suburban strip mall in Lexington, Kentucky on Lane Allen Road.⁴⁸ The Country was far from the only queer space in Lexington, but it did continue to be the only bar space devoted specifically to women until its closure.

Queer women built community, found lovers, established friendships, and organized for social and political change at The Country. The bar changed ownership by 1981, with Judelle Conley and Shirley Lyons as incorporators, and was renamed the Hidden Door.⁴⁹ During 1982, the establishment permanently closed its doors for good. As of now, there have not been any photographs of The Country's interior recovered. The lack of photographs, or at least the difficulty in locating them, is no doubt due to the pressing need for privacy and safety among queer women during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As such, we must rely on the words of queer women who frequented The Country to color the scenery with their memories.

⁴⁸ Jones, "Hidden Histories, Proud Communities: Multiple Narratives in the Queer Geographies of Lexington, Kentucky, 1930-1999."

⁴⁹ I will refer to the establishment broadly as The Country throughout this dissertation, though it was known as the Hidden Door for a period.

Interview Themes

All 14 of my oral history interviews were semi structured, with (roughly) the first third of the interview focusing on the interviewee's life before The Country, the second third focusing on the interviewee's interactions with The Country, and the final third focusing on the interviewee's life since The Country. All interviewees identified as lesbian, with one interviewee identifying as bisexual. The interviewees were also all women, though different interviewees sometimes used additional terms of gender identity to describe themselves tomboy and butch.

The interview topics included questions and conversation pertained to relationships, desire toward women (socially, romantically, and otherwise), negotiations of identity, maintenance of personal community, and material space (particularly as it related to The Country). I take after Vera Whisman's work on sexual identities, in which she relies on "narrative itself" as the unit of analysis, "rather than the reality it represents."⁵⁰ I examine the ways in which lesbian and queer women who went to The Country express their navigation of gender, desire, and space and, ultimately, put them into conversation with the posts made to the #nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr and their respective navigation of gender, desire, and space. I situate these analyses of discursive strategies in a broader discussion of historical and contemporary narratives of lesbian and queer identity.

Mixed Queer Space

⁵⁰ Vera Whisman, *Queer By Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Politics of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 8.

In urban areas, queer meeting spaces typically come in the form of bars and clubs. The Country fits squarely into the North American city tradition of queer people creating spaces for their own where they can safely express themselves without violating heterosexual assumptions and heterosexist standards. The Country, as a locus of queer congregating, was founded as and, for its interim, existed as a queer space. In order to define what I mean by queer space, I look to Jeff Jones, who penned the first published reference to The Country in his “Hidden Histories, Proud Communities”, to highlight an important feature of material queer spaces in small urban cities such as Lexington, Kentucky. Interestingly, while Jones defines queer space as dependent on the presence of material queer bodies, he also asserts that ultimately it is written language that imbues *long-term* queer meaning to a location. Queer spaces, he argues, are unstable due to the lack of physical and written texts to denote landscapes as queer. Rather than the external landscape itself, Jones continues, it is queer space that occupies queer bodies, rather than queer bodies occupying queer space.⁵¹ Jones contends that text (such as that in novels, tour maps, etc.) stabilizes queer spaces by invoking a “long-term meaning around” the “environment connecting it to the queer lives that helped create it.”⁵²

Jones, in his discussion of his conceptualization of queer space, poses a question regarding queer spaces in Lexington that, really, is the core question of my own dissertation. “How have these different spaces enabled and disabled particular behaviors

⁵¹ Jones, “Hidden Histories, Proud Communities: Multiple Narratives in the Queer Geographies of Lexington, Kentucky, 1930-1999,” 4.

⁵² Jones, 4.

and queer identities?”⁵³ I consider these questions throughout this chapter. At The Country, it is the presence of queer people that renders space queer.

Lexington was (and still is) home to several queer establishments during the mid and later 20th century, as described earlier in this chapter. However, these establishments were, as many of the interviewees put it, ‘mixed.’ This meant that the establishment, usually a bar, attracted a mixture of people, most often gay and queer men, some lesbians and queer women, and heterosexual onlookers. “It was mixed, men and women mixed,” according to CD, a published author and artist who used to go to the Country, states.⁵⁴ For some but not all, interviewees, the mixed nature of The Bar and other establishments in Lexington presented some barriers. Becky, a registered nurse in her 60s who also used to frequent The Country, reflects on this saying, “It’s [The Country] not like going to, you know, like, The Bar downtown, you know, it’s not the same. That wasn’t our bar. That’s a boy bar. Of course, a lot of straight people go there.”⁵⁵ Becky identifies The Bar Complex as a bar mostly for gay men by invoking an implicit comparison of gender: The Bar is for boys, and straight people, therefore, it is not our bar. Other interviewees shared this sentiment. Susan, who worked for IBM for many years, and used to frequent The Country, spoke on this, saying, “In the years that I went to The Bar, there were a lot of people who just wanted to watch the gay people, you know, gawk at us.”⁵⁶ Julie, a lesbian

⁵³ Jones, 31.

⁵⁴ Collins, CD. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁵⁵ Rhodus, Becky. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁵⁶ Sliger, Susan. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

in her sixties who currently works as an environmental manager put it succinctly, saying, “The men had their two-story palace and their showroom and all that stuff, why would they want to go where the fish are, as they would say?”⁵⁷ Julie is referring to the slang word fish which, sometimes, has been used by gay men to refer to cisgender women in a derogatory manner.

Whether some felt welcome or unwelcome, however, lesbians and --queer women carved out space for themselves at The Bar. Penny, who used to go to The Country, and is retired from working for a telephone company for over four decades and nearly 70 years old, recalls the significance of The Bar. “I lived there until they opened The Country.”⁵⁸ She would usually go two or three nights a week at least. “It was two stories,” Penny describes The Bar, then known as The Living Room, “and there was a spiral staircase, and the lesbians were pretty much upstairs and the men were down.” Other interviewees noted this spatial distinction, with the lesbians on the staircase, at the top, upstairs in general. Interviewees even let me know that this spiral staircase was sometimes colloquially referred to as ‘Dyke Alley’. Beverly, a bisexual woman currently retired after working for Chevron Corporation for many years and achieving the financial independence she sought for, also went to The Bar Complex. Beverly described going to The Bar every weekend until, years later, she moved away from Lexington. She recalls it as among her favorite places, emphasizing a sense of togetherness, saying, “You had a lot

⁵⁷ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁵⁸ Sliger, Susan. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

of people who weren't alone." Beverly adds that when "they opened the women's bar [The Country] then I went there every weekend."⁵⁹

Lesbian Desire and Space

Several interviewees made a distinction between The Country and other queer spaces in Lexington, marking the establishment with gendered specificity and a matrix of desire for the company—emotionally and/or sexually-- of women. Multiple interviewees articulate that The Country was founded to remedy the lack of a public space in Lexington for women to meet other women. Queer people of all sorts occupied The Bar Complex, a decidedly queer space, but it was The Country that offered these lesbian and queer women, whether they had previously been satisfied with The Bar previously or not, something that The Bar did not at the time. The Country women's bar functioned as a queer space, but it was experienced by some as also a lesbian space, one where lesbian and queer women could drink, dance, talk, and connect emotionally and sexually among women. Discussing this, CD asserts, "We needed it, you know, we needed it." The Country was well suited to meet those needs and, in fact, was explicitly created as a solution to this unmet need.

Interviewees, including those who went to The Bar, or even consistently enjoyed The Bar, derived community, support, and happiness from The Country as specifically *lesbian* space. Overwhelmingly, the lesbians and queer women I interviewed emphasized the importance of bonding between women. Sometimes this bonding was described as

⁵⁹ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

sexual (hookups) or romantic (discussion of meeting romantic partners at The Country), but often this bonding was phrased as a more generalized spirit of fun and freedom among women.

I define lesbian space, within the scope of this project, as space that is rendered lesbian via the presence of lesbian *desire*. I rely on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum to elucidate the significance of the centrality of desire toward other women that was applicable to so many of the interviewees' experience of The Country (1980).⁶⁰ Whereas queer spaces accrete through the presence of queer bodies, lesbian spaces accrete through the convergence both of queer bodies and of desire towards women. I argue that desire between women renders The Country a *specifically* lesbian space in the oral history narratives, rather than just a queer space alone. Rich defines the lesbian continuum as a spectrum of woman-identified experiences, an expansive vision of lesbianism that is not at all limited to genital sexual contact. Rich argues that limiting lesbian experience to those who engage sexually with other women is a "limited" and "mostly clinical" definition of lesbianism.⁶¹ Rich describes woman identification as moments of connection and interaction between women, such as intense friendships among young girls. She emphasizes the ways that women are inclined toward emotional and sensual points of connection with other women, relying on Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the sensual, of the erotic, as the sharing of joy.⁶² 650

⁶⁰ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Women: Sex and Sexuality* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–60.

⁶¹ Rich, 649.

⁶² Rich, 650.

I rely on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum to establish the breadth of this desire, and detach it from specific sexual identities (meaning, ones does not need to identify as a lesbian to be on the lesbian continuum). Rich goes on to argue, writing:

“...as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,' and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which 'makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.' If we consider the possibility that all women...exist on lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not.”⁶³

Rich's lesbian did not have to sleep with other women to belong on the lesbian continuum. By theorizing the lesbian this way Rich opens up what she sees as the liberatory potential of love between women to all women, even heterosexual women. Lesbianism became a position all women could come into instead of a distinct, static category of identity. I define lesbian space as dependent on the presence of lesbian desire, desire as based off Rich's expansive lesbian continuum which pertains to the sharing of joy in many forms. The women who went to The Country, whether they identified as lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, or however else, were in a space contingent on lesbian desire. It is this desire, in fact, that brought about the founding of The Country in the first place.

Softball and Lesbian Space

⁶³ Rich, 650.

According to the interviewees, many of the lesbian and queer women who ended up frequenting The Country had already formed a lesbian, queer community through softball leagues. It was not only the presence of these lesbian and queer women that turned The Country into a lesbian space, it was also the preexisting bonds between them that established The Country as a lesbian space before it even opened its doors.

Helen Lenskyj, whose research focuses on gender and sports, quite accurately remarked on the import of softball to lesbians and queer women, stating, “any discussions of lesbians in sport, the game of softball deserves its own category.”⁶⁴ Lillian Faderman notes the preeminence of athletics, particularly softball, in the mid 20th-century lesbian communities in cities (not specifically Lexington, but other cities like it) that she examines in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991). During the 1950s and 1960s, Faderman writes, working class and young lesbians established space outside of the gay bars to socialize. The most prominent of these spaces was softball teams. Lesbians, Faderman claimed, “formed [softball] teams or made up the audience for teams all over the country”.⁶⁵ Softball practices and games provided an opportunity for women to make lesbian connections outside of bars. Sometimes bars were avoided for reasons of privacy and personal safety. Sometimes, there simply were not any women’s bars or queer bars in the area to go to. This was certainly the case in Lexington until The Country was founded. The possibility of lesbian connection through softball was not entirely unknown

⁶⁴ Helen Lenskyj, “No Fear? Lesbians in Sport and Physical Education,” *Women in Sport & Physical Activity* 6, no. 2 (n.d.).

⁶⁵ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 161.

to outsiders at the time. Julie wryly recalls her grandmother telling her not to get involved with softball when she was younger since, her grandmother warning her, there would be lesbians.

Several interviewees were part of a network of softball teams. They described the teams as being comprised mostly of lesbian and queer women (some used the word ‘tomboy’ or ‘butches’), along with a few ‘token’ straight girls. Multiple softball leagues would compete in cities across the state and in nearby states. Several interviewees who grew up in Lexington either played softball, attended the games, or sponsored softball teams. Interviewees who grew up outside of Lexington not uncommonly were already playing softball in their hometown then, upon moving to Lexington, naturally joined one of the Lexington teams. Softball, in the form of practices, tournaments, trips, and parties were the primary spaces available for socializing with other lesbians and queer women for these interviewees. “That was our big social activity, I think, was softball,” Penny reminisces, “and the parties afterward, and the practices, and the party after practice, and the party after the game, just...let’s have a party.”⁶⁶ Others recall softball as the axis of their community, though socializing as attached to softball frequently took place indoors in private homes. Susan remembers:

“So, we did a lot of stuff at our houses. I know the group that I was with, you know, we’d play cards together, we’d cook steaks together, you know, just every kind of thing. And we, we always said, wouldn’t it be neat if we had a place to go?”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Howard, Penny. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁶⁷ Sliger, Susan. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Softball was the foundation, and The Country was a development that was born out of that community. One interviewee, Becky, went so far as to say, “The Country wouldn’t be there if it weren’t for the softball players, and the people who created it were softball players.”⁶⁸ I interviewed one of the original three founders of The Country, Kathryn, who would end up doing construction for and ultimately managing The Country for the first legs of its journey. Kathryn, like other interviewees, emphasized the importance of softball to herself and others in her social group. Kathryn grew up in Lexington playing softball during summers for the Lexington Parks & Recreation League. Later, once she grew older, she ended up sponsoring a girls softball team (and in fact, some of my interviewees played on this team). Kathryn recalls that Lexington Parks & Recreation was “run well and very focused on women’s sports so we had a lot of opportunity to participate.”⁶⁹ This support provided a foundation for fun, sports, parties, and socializing. It also provided a platform for the pivotal emotional support that some of these women sought. Kathryn recalls the way she and other lesbian and queer women came together through sports, saying:

“You somehow find each other because you know you’re different [...] You start looking for avenues to do that [find others who are different]. You don’t really do that consciously. You just do it, then you happen on each other, and before you know it, you know lots of folks. And you have a group that you belong to and acceptance and everything.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁶⁹ Bailey, Kathryn Gail. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁷⁰ Bailey, Kathryn Gail. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Women's sports, particularly that of softball, was and vital locus for community building among lesbians and queer women. It, too, was ultimately the foundation for The Country.

The Country as Lesbian Space

There was already a community of lesbian and queer women who played softball (or watched). From that community, the desire for a place of their own arose. Kathryn recalls that the inception of The Country came from conversations that took place among her social group. "The genesis," she remembers, "was a safe, comfortable place to be who you are."⁷¹ Kathryn and the other two founders made an initial investment from their own funding to secure a space for a women's bar. Many queer-oriented spaces in Lexington, both during the time of The Country and since, are located downtown. The Country was different, being located out in a strip mall. Kathryn explains the reasoning behind the location, saying, "Lane Allen [the strip mall] was the perfect location to, uh, all the many places we lived. It was a great central location."⁷² Not only was Lane Allen strip mall close to different members of their community, but it also had a pizza place that just went out of business. Kathryn gutted the property herself and built the bones of The Country. She was also responsible for naming The Country. When Kathryn was doing basic training in San Antonio, Texas the largest gay bar was The Country. She had such a fondness for the place that she named The Country women's bar after it. Ultimately, according to Kathryn, what her and other lesbian and queer women, who

⁷¹ Bailey, Kathryn Gail. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁷² Bailey, Kathryn Gail. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

were so used to socializing at games and in house parties, wanted “to be in a place that has walls that others can’t penetrate so easily.”⁷³

The space was never too large, and never too fancy, but The Country fulfilled its purpose. Kathryn recalls that they started off with a smaller dance floor but were able to expand after three to four months. Overall, The Country featured a large dance floor with a mirror ball, a bar, a DJ booth with a window, bathrooms, a pool table, foosball, and a balcony out back. The exterior of The Country was far from ostentatious. “You didn’t know where it was unless you knew where it was,” is how Becky describes the discreet exterior of the Country. There was no outdoor signage. First, there was a foyer, that The Country shared with another business (an insurance office, at least for a period). Inside the shared foyer, the door to The Country was, as interviewees recall, intentionally non-descript for the purposes of privacy (no doubt this is why, when The Country was sold to a different owner during its later years, it was renamed the Hidden Door). Just inside that door was a small, interstitial space (some described it as a little ‘cove’). Technically the large dance floor was straight ahead but Kathryn installed a wall, that way if anybody stumbled in, they couldn’t see the dance floor, nor could they see immediately anywhere into the bar, again for privacy and safety reasons. Then, through yet another door was the main bar area with the bar, pool table, foosball, bathrooms, and (some remember this, some don’t) eventually small tables for sitting. Then, to the left, was the doorway into the dance floor. There was a DJ window that way the DJ could see into the dance floor. All the interviewees recall that the DJ primarily played disco music.

⁷³ Bailey, Kathryn Gail. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

“I always remember there being a lot of women there”⁷⁴, Lezah, who works in sales now and used to go to The Country, reminisces. Interviewees recall that The Country was popular among lesbian and queer women in their circle, but not especially large, either. “It was not that big of a place,” Julie mentioned, “I mean, if you had twenty people it was crowded and there was Saturday nights [where there were] many, many more than that.”⁷⁵ On the opening night of The Country, women came from all over the state, enough that there was a line out the door. On that night, and all the nights following that The Country was open into 1982, lesbian and queer women would drink, dance, talk, play pool, hook up, find love, make new friends, and catch up with old friends. The Country celebrated holidays, such as Halloween, did pool tournaments, and had brunches during some Sunday afternoons. The Country was mindful, of course, of softball seasons, opening and closing on different days to suit the purposes of softball matches and tournaments (and post-match parties, of course).

Central to all these activities was the act of bonding with women. “Well,” Beverly says, “It was great feeling comfortable and able to have a great time with just women. I mean, that’s the best feeling. That’s probably one of the best times of my life.”⁷⁶ Penny also recalls The Country fondly. She became emotional as she said, “I think it was a

⁷⁴ Preston, Lezah. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁷⁵ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁷⁶ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Henry Faulkner Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

joyous occasion and everybody was excited to have our space. Um, I'm getting emotional [...] It meant a lot."⁷⁷

Being with women was experienced by interviewees in platonic and romantic (or anywhere in between) modes. Julie describes it this way:

"They had a network of friends they wanted to go to be able to feel comfortable, you know. It wasn't about necessarily hooking up, it was more about, where can we go out to have a good time and dance and, and feel comfortable without feeling like people were going to stare at us or whatever."⁷⁸

Julie also recalls how instrumental an older woman, who sometimes acted as a bouncer at The Country, was to her coming out to her family. One night, the older woman checked Julie's ID at the door, and noticed that Julie was in fact the daughter of her co-worker of 30 years (Julie's father). "She wound up talking my dad off the ledge about me being gay."⁷⁹

There were though, of course, romantic connections being made as well. Julie tells a fascinating anecdote about the time she and some friends decided to map out who had been in relationships with, or involved with, who in their social circle. She compared it to the famous moment on the show *The L Word*, in which the character Alice takes it

⁷⁷ Howard, Penny. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Henry Faulkner Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁷⁸ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Henry Faulkner Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁷⁹ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Henry Faulkner Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

on herself to draw a labelled graph with nodes representing different women and lines connecting them, to represent different relationships or hookups.

“People think the L Word invented the chart. We did that in [redacted]'s kitchen when we were remodeling it when I was probably 28 or 30, and there were a lot of surprises [...] We called it the Dyke Wall of Life.”⁸⁰

Lesbian and queer women wanted to participate in social activities together, whether platonic or romantic, safely and comfortably—themes that came up in these interviews again and again. The material space of The Country, which ensured both privacy and fun, was well-suited to these purposes. Another measure, that ensured safety, and ultimately a delineation of community boundaries, was the institution of membership cards. Kathryn recalls that some women were uncomfortable with the fact that, technically, anybody could walk into their space. “Since we were all women we were kind of vulnerable a little bit,” Kathryn explained. “So, we made the decision to make it [The Country] a private club.” The Country instituted membership cards. There was a (tiny) monthly fee. One had to either have a membership card, or be accompanied by somebody else with a membership card, in order to enter. This was not the only safety measure taken, and certainly not the only one linked with notions of vulnerability and (of course justified) a fear of violence, particularly from men. They largely felt safe from men with bad intentions, and others, due to the many safety measures taken. Sometimes this sense of safety was accomplished through women acting as guards. Julie recalls that once in a while a car of men would drive through the parking lot and shout words like

⁸⁰ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar, Henry Faulkner Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

'bitch' or 'dyke' or 'lesbo.' However, Julie adds, "Usually there were more of us than them, and, usually there were several of us who were much tougher than them, you know, some big burly bull dyke kind of looking women that they didn't stop to mess with us."⁸¹

While The Country had no specific rules barring any gender from entry, men only rarely stopped by. These men were friends of lesbian and queer women who went to The Country, some straight, some queer. Overall, interviewees speculated that there was not much to interest men of any sexuality at The Country, since it so significantly catered toward lesbian and queer women. Considering The Country ran along lines of lesbian desire, in all forms, there was not much for men to engage with. In fact, while several interviewees recalled seeing a man or two there a couple times, some interviewees could not recall any men ever visiting.

Being Ourselves

One phrase that came up again and again in these interviewees was the notion of “being yourself.” A feeling of being authentic, free, and wholly themselves figured into these interviewees’ expressions of what they found so special about The Country.

Kathryn, one of the three founders, summed up the purpose of The Country along the lines of safety and authenticity. “What you’re trying to do is go to a place to be safe with people like yourselves, that you’re allowed to be who you are and be comfortable. So, that was important.”⁸² Kathryn went so far as to say that The Country was a “safe haven”

⁸¹ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar, Henry Faulkner Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁸² Bailey, Kathryn. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

and that safety really became the core [of The Country].”⁸³ This effect was felt by most, if not all, the interviewees. Lezah fondly recalls The Country as a unique and treasured location, saying, “Back then it [being gay] wasn’t really accepted at all and, you know, and you were kind of scared of that.” That fear was lifted for Lezah inside The Country. “We knew when we were in there, we were safe.” Elaborating further, Lezah shared:

“We would definitely go and dance and just, you know, have a great time and be able to be together and, you know, and dance together, kiss if we wanted too, it was just like, cause, it was the only place we could go and be ourselves that we knew of.”⁸⁴

According to Lezah, “There wasn’t anywhere else you could be yourself.”⁸⁵

Similarly, Becky also recalls that The Country “was a place that made me feel like it was ok to be who I was.”⁸⁶ Overwhelmingly the interviewees expressed that The Country was a place where they could be themselves. However, there were factors that complicated that experience for some. Beverly, who identifies as bisexual, shared about her experiences being made to feel that she had to choose ‘one gender or the other’. Beverly explains, “I fit in [at The Country] but I had to be what they wanted me to be, even then, I’ve always been bisexual and, they, that’s not accepted. Even today it’s not.”⁸⁷ She

⁸³ Bailey, Kathryn. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁸⁴ Preston, Lezah. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁸⁵ Preston, Lezah. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁸⁶ Rhodus, Becky. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁸⁷ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

further explains that the women she dated at the time did not want to see her as bisexual. As for why, Beverly speculated that these women perhaps found it threatening. "It was not accepted,"⁸⁸ Beverly made clear. That said, Beverly, like the other interviewees, emphasized that she overall felt more comfortable and safer in The Country as compared with other spaces. When I asked her why she felt so safe at The Country, she immediately responded, "There were no straight men there."⁸⁹ Pressing her on why it made her feel safe, the absence of straight men, Beverly's answer was, "It's their politics, their conservative views."⁹⁰ Ultimately, Beverly expressed that straight men made her feel "like I was second class."⁹¹

Gender Identity and Gender Expression

All of the interviewees for *The Country* oral history project are women. I phrase this as them simply being women, rather than 'they identify as women', out of respect for how proudly and adamantly these women declared themselves as women. "I *am* a woman, hear me roar," CD exclaimed aptly.⁹² "I've never been confused about gender,"

⁸⁸ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁸⁹ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹⁰ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹¹ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹² Collins, CD. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Julie put it, "I don't want to be called a 'they'."⁹³ Julie was not the only interviewee to make oblique (others yet even overt) references to modern, more queer constructs of identity (clearly, the 'they' refers to nonbinary identity). 'Identify as' is more of a modern concept and framing of gender identity, as it aligns itself with a specific mode of identity (that one opts to associate their inner self as represented by a particular word in this specific, intentioned manner), whereas these women strongly felt and expressed that they are women (harkening to a more essentialist mode of inherent sexed characteristics). I aim to respect this, and not place my understandings of gender, or those of broader academia at this moment, on these women who so graciously shared their personal stories with me. It would mean enforcing a model of identity upon them that they simply do not ascribe to, as repeatedly they state that they *are* women, not that they *identify as* women.

However, in addition declarations of womanhood, many interviewees shared fascinating and rich stories, feelings, and thoughts regarding lesbian gender identities. This included butch, femme, and tomboy identities. Some interviewees recalled these terms being used among lesbians and queer women who went to The Country. Beverly, for example, expressed that she felt there "were more labels back then" and added that she thought butch in particular was more "popular" then.⁹⁴ Penny's thoughts on the matter were quite resolution, with her saying, "We were definitely using the word [butch and

⁹³ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹⁴ Youmans, Beverly. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

femme], and yeah, very much so butch and femme absolutely [...] It was very common."⁹⁵

Other interviewees yet felt that such notions (particularly butch/femme) rarely if ever circulated among their community during the time of The Country. "I rarely ever heard labelling," Kathryn recalls.⁹⁶ Julie also felt that there was not "really a butch femme vibe going on" at that time.⁹⁷ Susan elaborated on this topic, positing:

"The older, the more you go back in time, the more prevalent that was but coming forward, and this was a good thing, it faded. And it should have, because, we were trying, we, I guess we were trying to find our Identities in those terms and when, then, when we relaxed a little bit and found out 'hey, we can be who we are' then we didn't need those labels."⁹⁸

Different interviewees had different associations with terms such as butch or femme, and different interviewees held varied opinions on the act of engaging with labels at all.

Susan, for instance, stated, "My take on it was I didn't care how they labeled themselves.

I was more interested in who they were and their personalities and things like that."⁹⁹ For

⁹⁵ Howard, Penny. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹⁶ Bailey, Kathryn. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹⁷ Smoak, Julie. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹⁸ Sliger, Susan. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

⁹⁹ Sliger, Susan. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Susan, and some others, labels were seen as clouding the self, as obscuring more inherent elements (such as personality). Labels, in this construction, are a necessary but only temporary solution on the journey toward self-acceptance and broader acceptance. For Susan, it was communities like the one surrounding The Country that allowed people to be themselves wholly and fully. "We went, it has allowed us to be ourselves, and, really, that's, well, there's no replacement for that."¹⁰⁰

These ways of doing lesbian gender was often linked with particular gender identities. Some interviewees described childhood memories of wanting to be male. Experiences of 'inversion' are not uncommon in lesbian discourses concerning sexual and gender identities. Other interviewees vehemently declared that they had never felt confused about their gender and strongly identified as a woman. All interviewees expressed that they are women, but different interviewees would potentially add additional terms, in order to express different facets of their personality. Becky exemplified this, discussing at length her simultaneous identities as a woman and as a tomboy, saying:

"I have three big brothers, uh, so there was no girls around [when she was a kid], so I played with boys, and played sports with boys... I'm a tomboy. I'm still a tomboy. And it's always been that way."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Sliger, Susan. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ Rhodus, Becky. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Later during the same interview Becky elaborated further, adding, "There's not one of those letters in that L B Q T Y Z thing that says tomboy. [laughs] That would be the first thing I identify as, as a tomboy."¹⁰² She added that as she has gotten older she has been able to figure this out. For Becky, the notion of a tomboy is linked with being a lesbian (though not all lesbians are tomboys -- she acknowledges the presence of feminine lesbians, for instance), but also carries additional qualities to just being attracted to women-- different physical qualities and emotional styles. She discussed wearing boys' clothes as a child (hand me downs from her best friend, who was her male cousin), and climbing trees and playing in the dirt, and related those qualities to being a tomboy. She also differentiated being a tomboy from being butch. Becky says that while some have referred to her as butch, "I never think of myself like that, because again, I see myself as a tomboy, being androgynous and self-sufficient. I don't think that means I'm butch." Others characterized 'tomboy' somewhat differently. Penny described tomboy this way: "That's a good way to handle it [referring to a lesbian] when you don't know how to talk about it or how to label it, so people would use tomboy, I think, as just kind of a blanket cover for those of us who were gay."¹⁰³

As mentioned, Julie was not the only interviewee to reference more contemporary understandings of gender. These references and invocations were brought up without a specific prompt, as I never asked about gender identities today, or nonbinary identity, or

¹⁰² Rhodus, Becky. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

¹⁰³ Howard, Penny. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

anything of the sort. CD, however, did mention that she felt if she were younger that she might be attracted to the nonbinary label.

"I mean, I know there are these struggles going on about binary, nonbinary, you know, nonbinary and those things are really important and I think if it were up for me if I was 25, then I would be thinking about it too, you know, like, if I wanted to be nonbinary. But it was not my struggle. I had scars, I was molested, I needed to be a woman, you know? I needed to find my womanhood. And I'm not ready to leave that, you know?"¹⁰⁴

Here, CD acknowledges the idea that, were she young, she would consider nonbinary identity. She adds that she needed to be a woman, due to her circumstances, and the trauma she experienced, rather than needing to be nonbinary the way some people do now. Kathryn also organically brought this topic up, stating:

"Some of these new, you know, the new um, labels that people, um, obviously need and want and uh and group all that together... It's more about social networking and those kind of things and awareness of the world today."¹⁰⁵

Whereas others seemed to feel that labels were unnecessary, or even harmful, Kathryn relates these labels new to her with a need, legitimating the idea that some individuals may need these new labels to socially network with others.

¹⁰⁴ Collins, CD. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

¹⁰⁵ Bailey, Kathryn. Interview by Adriana Sisko. *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Conclusion

Overall, The Country was a foundational queer space *and* lesbian space for Lexington, Kentucky during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Interviewees who used to go to The Country emphasized its importance as a space for women to bond, in a manner of ways, and as a safe place to be themselves. Several interviewees described The Country as the *only* place they could be themselves during that time-period. Furthermore, interviewees freely, sometimes even unprovoked, discussed gender expression and identity terminology, or, ‘labels’. This did not apply to all interviewees, but most interviewees were quite vocal that people should feel free to be who they are without labels, and eschewed labels, as though labels were an inauthentic or performative dressing, and not related at all to the act of being oneself.

There is also a growing body of scholarship not only of material queer spaces, such as gay bars, but also digital queer spaces and geographies of sexuality online, such as queer dating apps¹⁰⁶ and social media.¹⁰⁷ Tumblr as a platform is known for significant LGBTQ+ usership and frequent conversations regarding sex and sexuality through discourses of feminism, queer studies, gender studies, antiracism, and postcolonialism. Bryce J. Renninger argues, relying on danah boyd’s concept of networked publics as space created through networked technologies, that Tumblr is a networked public that, due to its tag-based structure, which allows for posts on a certain topic or posts

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Baudinette, “Gay Dating Applications and the Production/Reinforcement of Queer Space in Tokyo,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 33, no. 1 (2019).

¹⁰⁷ Rohit K. Dasgupta, “Digital Queer Spaces: Interrogating Identity, Belonging and Nationalism in Contemporary India” (University of the Arts London, 2016).

addressing a specific group to be found in one space, fosters the counterpublic communication.¹⁰⁸ Tumblr is well-known, within public discourse and scholarly research, for a range of counterpublics, or, subsets of publics that “stand in conscientious opposition to a dominant ideology and subvert that ideology’s construction in public discourse”. In the case of the #nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr, the tag functions as a digital queer space wherein those who identify as nonbinary lesbians, or those who simply want to discuss the notion of nonbinary lesbianism, can engage in communication that runs counterpublic to more mainstream definitions of lesbian, trans, and nonbinary. The tag also provides a fixed location for engagement concerning nonbinary lesbianism which includes debate concerning the meaning and politics of labels of gender and sexual identity, as well as outright community building in the form of posts specifically seeking friendship with nonbinary lesbian identified people.

In the next chapter, I consider the nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr, exploring the importance of language and terminology in the function of the tag as a digital lesbian space. I explore community formation, and discursive strategies of legitimation. In Chapter 4, I relate the narratives embedded in the testimonies of lesbian and queer women interviewees from *The Country* oral history project to the discursive strategies apparent in posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr from 2016-2020.

¹⁰⁸ Bryce J. Renninger, “‘Where I Can Be Myself ... Where I Can Speak My Mind’ : Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2014): 1513–29.

CHAPTER 3. “My Gender is Lesbian”: Nonbinary Lesbian Identity on Tumblr

Orbisian. Trixic. Feminamoric. Lunarian.

Not all these words may be familiar to you. However, if you have ever spent time on Tumblr, chances are that you have encountered at least one of these terms. Feminism, activism, and LGBTQ+ politics are an inextricable part of Tumblr culture. These subjects do not represent merely a slice of what Tumblr users discuss but, rather, are omnipresent throughout the very fabric of the website’s culture. Users discuss freely topics ranging from the fetishization of cisgender gay men in fanfiction to cultural appropriation in fashion. Allison McCracken, reflecting on youth subcultures on the blogging platform Tumblr and the ways they engage with media, observes that Tumblr has “become a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness that often reproduces cultural studies methods of media analysis.”¹⁰⁹ Many Tumblr users speak from their own lived experience “through shared popular discourses of feminism, antiracism, queer or gender studies, and postcolonialism.”¹¹⁰ Discussions “of sex and sexuality” on Tumblr have “become formative for many” LGBTQ+ identified Tumblr users.¹¹¹ The popular blogging platform boasts a userbase of nearly 29 million and increasing mainstream awareness and popularity.¹¹² Among the litany of new gender and

¹⁰⁹ Allison McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061>.

¹¹⁰ McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement”, 152.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 156.

¹¹² “60+ Stunning Tumblr Statistics - How Big Is The Platform In 2021?,” TechJury, March 22, 2019, <https://techjury.net/blog/tumblr-statistics/>.

sexual terminologies being coined and discussed on Tumblr is that of nonbinary lesbian identity, a seemingly contradictory term that denotes individuals who feel they are both nonbinary and lesbian simultaneously.

In this chapter, I begin by describing Tumblr as a digital platform that hosts vibrant feminist and queer participatory subcultures among, primarily, youth. I also consider the (at times quite self-aware) role of ‘discourse’ concerning gender and sexuality among users on Tumblr. Then, I provide an overview of the way language and gender and sexual terminologies form the basis of community formation on Tumblr, as a text-heavy networked public with a user-created, tag-based digital architecture and propensities toward fandom. Finally, I define nonbinary lesbian identity, and explore the accretion of a community surrounding the nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr from 2016 to 2020.¹¹³ Throughout, I consider convergence and departures between the material lesbian space of The Country, and the digital lesbian space of #nonbinary lesbian, and their respective discursive strategies of lesbian identity expression and validation.

The Discourse on Tumblr

In *The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism*, Krystin Felts expounds on Tumblr’s youth-driven feminism, writing, “Tumblr allows its users to develop feminist subjectivities as well, which they, like their personal identities, are then able to model for others [...] just seeing other young people writing and posting feminist ideas online may

¹¹³ I will use the phrase “#nonbinary lesbian” to refer to this tag at times.

have the effect of encouraging others to take up a feminist identity”.¹¹⁴ Felts argues that Tumblr makes politics, which can be “time-consuming, inaccessible, and unwelcoming to young people, particularly girls”, accessible to “a large audience of participants who may not be invested enough to spend hours reading feminist writing”.¹¹⁵ Felts describes this variety of political inundation as a “gradual process of politicization” that “that takes less effort over more time to create its subjects”.¹¹⁶ Felts finds that most self-described feminists on Tumblr (and there are many) describe their primary reason for sharing feminist content as a desire to educate other people.¹¹⁷ Felts asserts that the general sensibility of feminism on Tumblr has a distinct and consistent character. She describes this iteration of feminism on Tumblr:

[...] less as a collective movement and more as an individual source to draw on in combatting sexism [...] we see fewer systemic analyses of patriarchy and more individual stories about experiences within it. We see more liberal feminism that supports choice, inclusivity, and reform within the boundaries of neoliberalism, and less acceptance for revolutionary feminism and/or separatism.¹¹⁸

While Felts acknowledges the potential pitfalls of this slant of feminism, including isolation and an emphasis over individual expression rather than communal action, her analysis of Tumblr’s feminist culture is overwhelmingly positive and optimistic with boundless hope for the future of young, feminist-identified people. “Tumblr feminism”,

¹¹⁴ Kyrstin Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism” (Master’s Thesis, McGill University 2017), 94, <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/jq085n792?locale=en>.

¹¹⁵ Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism”, 97.

¹¹⁶ Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism”, 97.

¹¹⁷ Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism”, 84.

¹¹⁸ Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism”, 57.

Felts writes, “is definitely not without faults, but overall it contributes positively to the feminist movement and to the lives of its users”.¹¹⁹ Felts concludes by arguing that young people’s activism and particularly the “free online labour primarily coming from women and girls” should not be dismissed, as it is unpaid, creative, and smart.¹²⁰ That it is largely women and girls, or those who once identified that way, circulating this knowledge and awareness is a point that bears emphasis for the purposes of this research. Furthermore, that Tumblr is where users develop a feminist consciousness is also important, as it demonstrates how significant conversations of social justice (including more specifically LGBTQ+ related topics) on Tumblr are to feminism among a subsection of youth.

Several years ago, Jack Halberstam predicted that as gender-queer practices and forms continue to emerge, definitions of gay and lesbian will not remain static, and individuals “will produce new terms to delineate what they cannot.”¹²¹ Identity, especially gender and sexual identities, are taxonomized into innumerable categories. These categories are informed by Western understandings that, as Foucault argued, there is a measurable inner truth to all sexual subjects.¹²² Users on Tumblr declare their various identities on their blogs. For example, it is exceedingly common for Tumblr users to engage in such labeling practices in their ‘bio boxes’, ‘about me’ pages, and in the tags attached to their posts (tags are searchable on Tumblr, making tagging a vital part of

¹¹⁹ Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism”, 99.

¹²⁰ Felts, “The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism”, 99.

¹²¹ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 193.

¹²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I, An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

identity construction). Research finds that Tumblr users who choose to identify themselves consistently offer four pieces of information, as it relates to sexual and gender identity.¹²³ This includes designations of gender identity, preferred pronoun, sexual attraction, and romantic attraction. Sexual desire and romantic attachment are distinguished from one another, for example a woman identifying as a heteroromantic bisexual would have romantic feelings for men but experience sexual attraction toward multiple genders.

A subset of Tumblr's users spend time on the platform regularly coining, defining, and guarding terms of gender and sexual identities. Some of these identities (including all the identities listed at the beginning of this chapter) are coined by Tumblr users themselves. Orbisian, coined by Tumblr user demisexual-yuri in 2017, refers to non-binary individuals who are attracted to women.¹²⁴ According to the creator, orbisian was created as a nonbinary equivalent of sapphic. Mere months later another Tumblr user, non-aligned-sapphic, created an orbisian flag featuring yellow and pink which represented, respectively, being nonbinary and being attracted to women (2017, fig. 1).

¹²³ Abigail Oakley, "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr," *Social Media Society* 2, no. 3 (2016): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116664217>.

¹²⁴ "Trixic," LGBTQA Wiki, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/Trixic>.

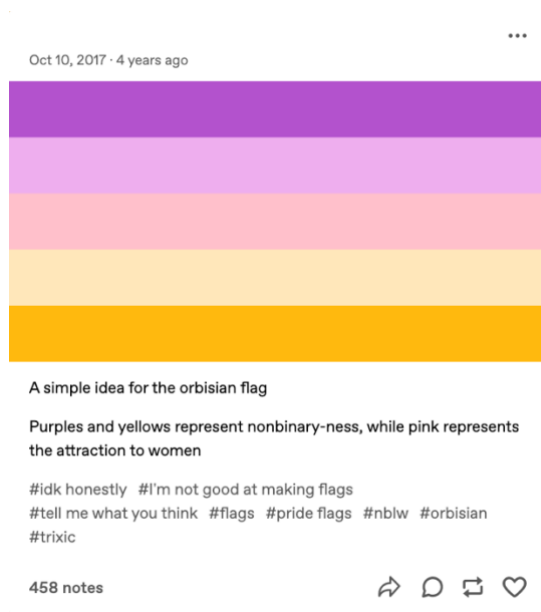


Figure 1 A proposed orbisian flag. Note that the user invites other users' thoughts in the tag, asking them to tell them what they think of the flag. Image by non-aligned-sapphic, "A simple idea for the orbisian flag," from nblw & awesome, October 10, 2017. <https://non-aligned-sapphic.tumblr.com/post/166265392726/orbisian-flag-idea-purples-and-yellowsshowing>

Orbisian is one example of many newly created terms and flags for different gender and sexual identities. There are countless others, in constant creation and recreation of their flags, definitions, and rules of permission in terms of who is or is not perceived as being 'allowed' to use them. Many of these identities, such as orbisian, or trixic, are far better known within the Tumblr community than outside it. Discussion of these newly coined LGBTQ+ identities, and who is or should not be part of the LGBTQ+ community, are frequent topics of discussion on Tumblr. These discussions take place between individual blogs as well as on relevant tags. Many participants in these

discussions are well versed in different feminist theories. Debates about who does or does not experience different privileges and oppressions, or who should or should not adopt particular gender/sexual identity terminologies, are especially commonplace. Sometimes these debates can become vitriolic.

Discussion regarding these subtopics has become commonplace enough that a meme emerged from and was propagated by Tumblr's userbase beginning during 2015 that put a name to the phenomenon: *The Discourse*. The Tumblr Discourse meme is typically invoked to refer to heated discussion of 'problematic' political and social issues which, again, are very common on Tumblr. Most typically, the meme is invoked to point out that a particular social and political discussion has devolved into hypocrisy, offense, pettiness, nonsense, and so on. The text meme is sometimes accompanied by an image of 'The Discourse Chef' (or, rarely, a photograph of Michel Foucault), though often the 'The Discourse' text phrase alone is enough to convey the meme's will to action. The first instance of The Discourse meme being used as a 'comeback' took place on April 19th, 2015, and, tellingly, it was part of a discussion of sexual identity and, essentially, legitimacy to name.

ladygolem:

dreadcrow:

64bitwar:

Declaring yourself asexual is actually a form of self-diagnosis.

You have no business diagnosing yourself. You are not qualified to evaluate your own biology or psychology. It's literally equivalent to just deciding you're bipolar. It's not a personal identity decision.

You have no business diagnosing yourself.

i can't believe i'm a Self Diagnosed Asexual.



Figure 2. First known instance of the Discourse meme. Note the posts preceding the image, and the way the image brands the first post as Discourse. Image originally by ladygolem, “Declaring yourself asexual is actually a form of self-diagnosis,” shared from Meme Documentation, December 28, 2015.

<https://memedocumentation.tumblr.com/post/136140338855/ladygolem-dreadcrow-64bitwar-declaring>

The Discourse, and the chef image, is intended to indicate in a wry, lampooning manner that the initial post (which dictates that “declaring yourself asexual is actually a form of self-diagnosis” and “self-diagnosis” is not a “personal identity decision”) is

wrong, in bad taste, or, simply put, a ‘bad take’. The image of the chef is cheesy, smug, yet somehow authoritative. This concept of discourse as “heated internet assertions and debates concerning LGBTQ+ identity of dubious quality” has endured well beyond 2015, and into the present day. The ‘discourse chef’ image is no longer frequently invoked (as is the way of memes, to wax and wane and transform), but the notion of ‘discourse’ absolutely is. Sometimes the Tumblr concept of discourse is textually implemented ironically (to mock, dismiss), but sometimes it is invoked in an entirely serious manner, decrying the perceived harm of its effects. Some users will add a “DNI” or “do not interact” warning at the bottom of their posts, making it clear that they do not want “discourse blogs” to interact (meaning like, reblog, message, so on) with them.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I adopt the perspective of discursive strategies as useful for elucidating the ideologies that undergird discourse, both those that destabilize the status quo and those that reproduce it. Discourse, in the general sense of the word, delineating how to go about being LGBTQ+ vastly predates Tumblr. The LGBTQ+ community has struggled to define itself for decades. Take, for instance, the tension between the assimilationist sensibility of Mattachine organizations during the mid 20th century, and the more radical (in the sense of investment in revolution) preferences of the Gay Liberation Movement of the second half of the 20th century.¹²⁵ Or, for example, the conflict between women who identified as and promoted political lesbians as “feminist theory in action”, versus those who felt that proponents of political lesbianism painted heterosexual and bisexual women as lacking in their feminist

¹²⁵ Ruth M Pettis, “Homophile Movement, U. S.,” in *GLBTQ*, 2008, http://www.glbqtarchive.com/ssh/homophile_movement_S.pdf.

convictions.¹²⁶ The arguments on either side of both points of cultural friction demonstrated their own respective discursive strategies. I define discursive strategies as tactics with which the subculture consciously and unconsciously communicates its ideologies, taking after Foucault's formulation of discourse as having a 'tactical function' in joining knowledge with power.¹²⁷ I also take from Adrian Blackledge's argument that discursive practices "should be regarded as both structured and structuring actions", clarifying that discourse is "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned".¹²⁸ What topics pop up in a digital space for young, lesbian-associated people? What discursive strategies are deployed? What do those topics and strategies have to say about queer youth culture online today? How has an identity seemingly so contrary gained in awareness and definition? Discursive strategies can elucidate points of cultural tension, and clearly clashing schemas of gender and sexual identity models is a point of contention among Tumblr users. The Tumblr userbase understands this well enough to have memed its frequency (and potency) on their own platform—a discursive strategy of its own, really.

As well, Tumblr is an electronic medium, with its own unique interface and technical features, and these attributes both shape and are shaped by the digital communities of Tumblr users therewithin. This analysis also considers the attributes and constraints of the digital medium as constitutive with the development of communities,

¹²⁶ Shane Phelan, "(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics," *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 765–90.

¹²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 100.

¹²⁸ Adrian Blackledge, *Discourse and Power in a Multilingual World* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 4.

and therefore their respective and shared discursive strategies. For instance, the ‘tag’ feature on Tumblr, a default core feature of the site’s organization, provides digital space for connecting with users with shared interests. Tumblr allows users to assign keywords to their posts known as ‘tags’. Say a user is posting about coming out as gay, or reviewing a lesbian romance movie, they might add the tag ‘lesbian’ to their post to reach other people who choose to post to and browse the lesbian tag. The metadata allows for users to browse for posts pertaining to specified content, or special interests. This elemental feature of Tumblr’s interface allows for subcommunities (such as fandoms) to accrete around tags relevant to their interests. Whenever a user attaches tag to their post, that post becomes visible to any Tumblr user on that keyword search basis (unless the blog is set to private or has been deleted). This feature, and others, shape and are shaped by the culture(s) of Tumblr’s userbase.

Computer-Mediated Youth Subculture on Tumblr

The internet acts as a medium for the development of subcultures, communities, and the negotiation of social identity.¹²⁹ Communities on Tumblr are mediated through the unique digital interface that the platform provides. Rich subcultures developed before the advent of widely accessible internet, but internet subcultures today can “affiliate across location and time constraints.”¹³⁰ Computer-mediated communication allows for individuals who seek affiliation to find it. J. Patrick Williams suggests that internet

¹²⁹ Jessica A McArthur, “Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (March 2008): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859908325676>.

¹³⁰ McArthur, “Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style,” 59.

forums “simultaneously function as a subcultural resource, a form of subcultural expression, and a medium for subcultural existence for young people.”¹³¹ The internet, uniquely, is both a synchronous and asynchronous medium. Content and social presence can occur either in real time (through streaming, for instance) or in intervals (an individual commenting on a Facebook status hours after it has been posted). Old media, especially for young people, is being replaced by an inundation of internet content which is cultivated and maintained by, as Angela Nagle calls it, a small creative class.¹³² I consider the population of individuals behind the nonbinary lesbian tag to constitute a small creative community that makes words, definitions, and visual art. Subcultures that form online, such as those on Tumblr, are inextricably of the technology of internet connectivity, asynchronicity, and public digital space.

My examination of the nonbinary lesbian tag, and its broader implications for queer and lesbian identity online and beyond, relies in part on these notions of computer-mediated, participatory subcultures. Tumblr subcultures tend to be participatory in nature. Tumblr is well known for its emphasis on, in addition to feminism and social justice, fandom. Tumblr is rife with fanfiction, fanart, blogs devoted to particular fandoms, and more. Henry Jenkins coined the term ‘participatory subculture’ to describe the “social interactions of fan communities” that are uniquely different from “the activities of fans

¹³¹ J. Patrick Williams, “Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 2 (2006): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605285100>.

¹³² Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017), 3.

from other forms of spectatorship.”¹³³ Jenkins applies his concept of ‘participatory culture’ to fandoms, or subcultures of fans who experience camaraderie over their shared interest in a film, television show, book, etcetera. Likewise, I apply the concept of participatory culture to the users who post to the nonbinary lesbian tag.

Fandoms historically reach back to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* series. Sherlock-enthusiasts were shattered when Doyle seemingly killed off Sherlock Holmes, sending his detective over Reichenbach Falls along with his arch-nemesis James Moriarty. Fans sent Doyle outraged letters and established clubs to advocate for Sherlock’s return.¹³⁴ There were even fan-written homages written to continue Sherlock’s life, not entirely unlike contemporary fanfiction. Jenkins is particularly interested in fandom online, however. Jenkins argues that individual fans work within “larger communities and networks” that “allow them to spread content beyond their immediate geographic proximity.”¹³⁵ While fandoms are comprised of individuals, they come together as a community with the shared values and collective interests. They consume media, but also create media in the form of memes, fanfiction, art, and more. This means, the content shared in a fandom space can exceed that fandom space, potentially influencing far beyond its purview. Since then, other scholars have used participatory

¹³³ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 2.

¹³⁴ Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, “How Sherlock Holmes Changed the World,” BBC (BBC, January 6, 2016), <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160106-how-sherlock-holmes-changed-the-world>.

¹³⁵ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 34.

subculture as a framework for describing a manner of different groups and the how they deploy and distribute media to serve their collective interests.¹³⁶ Participatory subcultures accrete through shared sociality and identity, and new gender and sexual identities have functioned similarly on Tumblr, developing a community of shared interests and creations such as memes, icons, self-portraits, moodboards, stimboards, gifs, videos, poetry, wallpaper, new pride flags, selfies, and other writing dedicated toward expression of a specific gender or sexual identity.¹³⁷ Fandoms constitute subcultures that typically commune over shared interests, such as a favorite movie. While participating in discourse on the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag is not precisely a fandom in the traditional sense (it is not ‘entertainment’), it functions similarly. The fulcrum, there, is a shared interest in gender and sexual taxonomies, and an investment in expressing and exploring those taxonomies.

Jenkins’ later work emphasizes that, in addition to consuming media, participatory subcultures also play a significant role in shaping the way media circulates.¹³⁸ Fandom online relies on the internet’s ability to connect individuals who share interests. The internet also allows for fans to talk back to media creators, for instance in the form of Twitter hashtag ‘campaigns’ in which fans speak against aspects of media they dislike or find offensive, or advocate for the aspects they approve of or enjoy. This, in turn, influences content creators in how they handle and craft their

¹³⁶ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2.

¹³⁷ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 166.

¹³⁸ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 37.

creations. For another example, fans of the animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* were universally discontent with the cast of M. Night Shyamalan's 2010 movie adaptation, as Shyamalan's film casted primarily white actors and actresses in the roles of characters that were originally of color.¹³⁹ In 2018, Netflix announced that they would release a new live-action *Avatar* series. The company explicitly promised not to whitewash the new series. As these examples make clear, participatory cultures are part of a feedback loop. One node (media) creates output that in interacting with a second node (a participatory culture, such as a fandom) eventually influences input into the initial node (again, media). We can see this later as broader LGBTQ+ websites outside Tumblr take up the term nonbinary lesbian.

Defining the Nonbinary Lesbian

I must provide a thorough explanation of nonbinary lesbian before giving an overview of the posts I gathered, since nonbinary lesbian is the text that binds all the posts together via Tumblr's tagging system. This necessitates further explanation of MOGAI, an acronym popularized on Tumblr that stands for Marginalized Orientations Genders Alignments and Intersex."¹⁴⁰ MOGAI was intended to replace LGBTQ+ as a

¹³⁹ Maryann Johanson, "Wtf: M. Night Shyamalan on Why the Whitewashing of 'The Last Airbender' Totally Isn't Racist," FlickFilosopher.com, July 2, 2010, <https://www.flickfilosopher.com/2010/07/wtf-m-night-shyamalan-on-why-the-whitewashing-of-the-last-airbender-totally-isnt-racist.html>.

¹⁴⁰ "MOGAI," LGBTA Wiki, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/MOGAI>.

more inclusive, expansive umbrella term.¹⁴¹ Technically Tumblr is not the first place to use MOGAI, or other alternatives to LGBTQ+ (I still remember when QUILTBAG happened), but Tumblr was the launchpad through which MOGAI entered the vocabulary of LGBTQ+ individuals online. The first Tumblr user to employ MOGAI in their vocabulary is unknown, but multiple websites tracking the history of MOGAI online have tracked the beginning of the trend to late 2013 and early 2014¹⁴², and generally agree that MOGAI became firmly entrenched as a trend by mid 2014¹⁴³ due to the ride of several larger blogs that focused exclusively on coining and defining MOGAI identities as well as creating pride flags for representing different MOGAI identities. MOGAI became so well renowned on Tumblr that the internet outside of Tumblr became aware of the acronym and burgeoning community's existence. Entire Wikis, blogs, subreddits, and Facebook groups were created for the specific purpose of mocking MOGAI identities which, they argued, were becoming increasingly imaginative. In addition to offering an alternative to LGBTQ+, MOGAI offers an alternative system of gender and sexual identity. MOGAI is intended as inclusive of every identity that deviates from the

¹⁴¹ "The Definition of MOGAI," *RACHEL SHARP* (blog), October 5, 2016, <https://wrrrdnrrrdgrrrl.com/2016/10/05/the-definition-of-mogai/>.

¹⁴² "History Of MOGAI - MOGAIPedia," accessed September 7, 2021, <http://www.mogaipedia.org/wiki:history-of-mogai>.

¹⁴³ "MOGAI - MOGAIPedia," accessed September 7, 2021, <http://www.mogaipedia.org/wiki:mogai#toc8>.

allosexual¹⁴⁴, heterosexual, perioriented¹⁴⁵, cisgender, and dyadic¹⁴⁶ identities.¹⁴⁷ The LGBTQ+ acronym, and other related acronyms, are seen as centering allosexual, perioriented, and dyadic standards. The terminologies that populate the MOGAI umbrella are innumerable, constantly multiplying, and tend to 1) allow for splitting between romantic and sexual attraction, 2) allow for gender modalities beyond cisgender and transgender (ex: centrgender, those who do not identify as cisgender or transgender), 3) allows for stacking of multiple identity modes (ex: a bigender asexual lesbian is an individual that identifies as two genders, does not experience sexual attraction, but does experience romantic attraction and/or affinity toward women), and 4) bases the validity of one's gender and sexual identity in that individual's personal experience (meaning, if one identifies as stargender, an individual with an other-wordly or non-human gender, then their identity is valid as it is derived from their feelings). The MOGAI umbrella also shows an emphasis on terminology for nonbinary people to express different aspects of their gender and sexual attraction, such as the diamoric umbrella.¹⁴⁸ The diamoric umbrella encompasses sexual and romantic orientations that describe nonbinary attraction that do not conform to the gender binary. The MOGAI umbrella also contains alternate systems of gender entirely, such as the galactian system which is a classification system

¹⁴⁴ Those who experience sexual attraction to others.

¹⁴⁵ Those whose romantic and sexual attraction match (ex: a homosexual homoromantic person is an individual who is romantically and sexually attracted to the same gender, they are perioriented, whereas an individual who is bisexual and biromantic is not perioriented).

¹⁴⁶ Those who are not intersex.

¹⁴⁷ "MOGAI."

¹⁴⁸ "Diamoric," LGBTQA Wiki, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/Diamoric>.

for nonbinary people based on their relation to binary genders.¹⁴⁹ The vocabulary relies on celestial imagery. Solarian describes those that are aligned with masculinity, and lunarian those that align with femininity. While the words nonbinary and lesbian were not coined by MOGAI proponents, they were combined together from that same subculture, that same sensibility.

I define the term nonbinary lesbian as an individual who identifies as both lesbian and nonbinary on the basis (as I will demonstrate) of discourse about nonbinary lesbians on Tumblr and definitions crowdsourced on different LGBTQ+-related websites. This definition may seem confusing or even contradictory to the uninitiated, especially considering the word ‘lesbian’ typically indicates both a sexual preference for women and a gender identity as a woman whereas, seemingly in contradiction, nonbinary indicates a gender identity that is neither woman nor man. Breaking down the term, ‘nonbinary’ is statement of gender identity and a disavowal of the gender binary (“I am not a woman, or a man, I am nonbinary”), and ‘lesbian’ is a simultaneous statement of sexual orientation *and* broader existential affinity (“I am attracted to women and feel some broader connection with women too”). Typically, nonbinary lesbian denotes the following qualities: exclusive attraction to women, non-binary gender identification, and a feeling of connection, however complex and tenuous, with womanhood. In sum: a nonbinary lesbian is not a woman, and, still yet, is emotionally and erotically aligned with women. As I will later demonstrate in my close readings of all the posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag from 2016-2020, these themes crop up numerous times.

¹⁴⁹ “Galactian System,” Nonbinary Wiki, May 18, 2021, https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Galactian_system.

There is no absolute authority on the definition of nonbinary lesbian. At the time of this writing, nonbinary lesbian is simply too recent a notion to crop up in academic scholarship as well. There are several definitions of nonbinary lesbian proffered by queer online resources. These include Nonbinary Wiki, LGBTQA Wikia, and Queer Undefined, which as of this writing are the top three results when searching for “nonbinary lesbian” on Google. All three websites assemble crowdsourced definitions for terminology related to gender and sexual identity. Considering the nonbinary lesbian concept emerged from the internet, crowdsourced internet definitions seem appropriate for providing some context. Nonbinary Wiki and LGBTQA Wikia follow an online encyclopedic format (like Wikipedia), featuring full articles, and Queer Undefined functions as an online dictionary featuring user-submitted definitions. Both LGBTQA Wikia and Queer Undefined aim to act as a resource for those who are questioning (both of their ‘about’ pages use this word).¹⁵⁰ Nonbinary Wiki is devoted specifically to nonbinary advocacy by providing neutral and “neutral, inclusive, and useful” content to “anyone regardless of gender or culture.”¹⁵¹

Nonbinary Wiki mentions nonbinary lesbian along with a number of related terms on its romantic and sexual orientation page under the heading “Usually attracted to women.”¹⁵² Nonbinary lesbian, specifically, is placed within the lesbian section, sandwiched in between “gynephilia” and “NBLW” (an acronym for Nonbinary People Loving Women). Nonbinary Wiki defines lesbians as people who “simply put [...] are

¹⁵⁰ “Welcome to the LGBTQA Wiki”; “Queer Undefined: About.”

¹⁵¹ “Nonbinary Wiki: About.”

¹⁵² “Nonbinary Wiki: Romantic and Sexual Orientation.”

usually women who feel attraction to other women”. However, this recognizable definition changes as the paragraph continues to describe the ways, currently and historically, that some lesbians have experienced or displayed gender nonconformity. “Some see ‘lesbian’ as their gender identity as well as their sexuality,” the article reads. “Lesbians can be cisgender women, transgender women, nonbinary/genderqueer women, and anyone else who feels that their identities align with womanhood or that they have some kind of connection to womanhood.”

The article then goes on to list eight “notable nonbinary lesbians”, some of whom are living celebrities with self-professed nonbinary or genderfluid identities, such as actor Ruby Rose, who at times has claimed a genderfluid identity and a lesbian identity. Other individuals on the list are not celebrities but historical figures who, while they did not specifically ascribe to the term as it did not exist yet, claimed varying gender identities outside of simply ‘woman’ alongside an attraction to women (such as Leslie Feinberg who famously described herself as an “anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist”).¹⁵³

Notably, an Internet Wayback Machine screen-capture of this page from July 2016 shows that Nonbinary Wiki, then Nonbinary.org, did not include mention of “nonbinary lesbian” in its sexual orientation terminology at that time.¹⁵⁴ This does not mean that nobody was using the term nonbinary lesbian online during 2016 (my research on the “nonbinary lesbian” Tumblr tag proves otherwise) but it does potentially indicate that it was lesser known at this time even within online spaces oriented toward nonbinary

¹⁵³ Pratt, “Leslie Feinberg - A Communist Who Revolutionized Transgender Rights.”

identity. This latter aspect is also proven by my research on the “nonbinary lesbian” Tumblr tag, as there were only 16 posts made to that tag in 2016, whereas the years following (2017, 2018, and 2019) demonstrate an increase in post frequency.

LGBTQA Wikia defines a nonbinary lesbian as “a non-binary or genderqueer person who is attracted to women or woman aligned people in a sapphic way and identifies as a lesbian.”¹⁵⁵ The definition continues to note other related terms, adding that “non-binary lesbians are often (but not necessarily) feminine aligned or fimgender, woman aligned or fiaspec, woman-related, girlprox, intrafeminine, or transfeminine.” The article includes six nonbinary lesbian flags created by users. Queer Undefined provides three user-submitted definitions, each which feature a brief bio of the user who submitted. All three definitions refer to an individual who experiences attraction and some sort of ‘connection’ with womanhood, or being female. Urban Dictionary, a crowdsourced online dictionary originally intended for slang words, contains several user-submitted definitions for nonbinary lesbian, all from 2020 save one, which was from early 2021.¹⁵⁶ Again, by no means does this mean the term did not exist prior, but it does potentially indicate the recent, relative ascendance of the word in recent years.

Indications of a potential ascendance can be found using Google Trends, a webtool by Google that analyzes and tracks search queries. Google Trends charts the first instances of measurable search interest in nonbinary lesbian in late 2014. More frequent search interest begins during 2017 and continues, despite alternating peaks and falls, to

¹⁵⁵ “LGBTQA Wiki: Non-Binary Lesbian.”

¹⁵⁶ “Urban Dictionary: Nonbinary Lesbians,” Urban Dictionary, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=nonbinary%20lesbians>.

overall rise into significance into the 2020s. The search had notable spikes during June of 2020 and January of 2021. Google Trends notes that users searching for nonbinary lesbian also searched for the following related topics: genderqueer, flag (official symbol variety), and gender binary. Reference to and discussion of genderqueer identity and the gender binary took place on #nonbinary lesbian throughout 2016 – 2020. There were also a number of posts featuring pride flags (103).

Google Ngram Viewer, a search engine that graphs the frequencies of phrases in Google’s text corpus of sources printed between 1500 and 2019, does not show any results for the phrase “nonbinary lesbian” in its collection.¹⁵⁷ This is hardly surprising considering the term was coined within the past decade and lacks widespread awareness, sometimes even within a queer context. Google Ngram Viewer does show results for simply “nonbinary”, as it relates to the contemporary understanding of nonbinary gender identity, throughout the 2010s.¹⁵⁸ There are, as expected, a myriad of results for “lesbian” across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ “Google Ngram Viewer: Nonbinary Lesbian.”

¹⁵⁸ “Google Ngram Viewer:Nonbinary.”

¹⁵⁹ “Google Ngram Viewer: Lesbian.”

#nonbinary lesbian from 2016 - 2020

I have coded and categorized all 1,639 posts made to the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag from 2016 – 2020.¹⁶⁰ The following broad categories that encapsulate the varieties of posts in my data set:

Gender and Sexual Identity: post body mentions, by name, an identity that encompasses both gender identity AND sexual identity (ex: feminamoric, which refers to nonbinary people attracted to women). The nature of these posts varies. These posts feature, but are not limited to, the following: coming out as x label, seeking advice about x label, asking questions about x label, posting graphic art related to x label, declaring or exploring attraction to x label, and posts defending the validity of x label.

Gender Expression: post body mentions, by name, a term related to gender expression (ex: femininity, or butch). The nature of these posts varies. These posts feature, but are not limited to, the following: describing self as x expression, seeking advice about x expression, asking questions about x expression, posting graphic art related to x expression, declaring or exploring attraction to x expression, and posts defending the validity of x expression.

Gender Identity: post body mentions, by name, a gender identity (ex: nonbinary). The nature of these posts varies. These posts feature, but are not limited to, the following: coming out as x label, seeking advice about x label, asking questions about x label, posting graphic art related to x label, declaring or exploring attraction to x label, and posts defending the validity of x label.

¹⁶⁰ *TumblrThree - A Tumblr Blog Backup Application.*

Sexual/Romantic Orientation: post body mentions, by name, a sexual/romantic orientation (ex: bisexual). The nature of these posts varies. These posts feature, but are not limited to, the following: coming out as x label, seeking advice about x label, asking questions about x label, posting graphic art related to x label, declaring or exploring attraction to x label, and posts defending the validity of x label.

Pronouns: post body mentions, by name, a particular set of pronouns. The nature of these posts varies. These posts feature, but are not limited to, the following: seeking advice regarding pronouns, discussing misgendering, declaring a new set of pronouns, exploring level of comfort with different pronouns, and posts defending the validity of x pronouns.

User Creations: post body features something created by the user. The nature of these user creations varies. User creations include, but are not limited to, the following: visual art, icons, memes, moodboards, poetry, pride flags, selfies, self portrait, stimboards, wallpaper, and other writing.

In the following sections, I provide an overview of the most prominent subjects and discursive strategies that I located among posts in these categories, and I consider the ideologies, clashes, and unions that undergird these patterns.

Positivity and Validity

Tumblr users look to other Tumblr users as authorities on labels. Of course, not all users are alike. As is typical Tumblr practice, some posts on the nonbinary lesbian tag will contain a DNI or “do not interact” warning in which they ask that individuals (typically identified as TERFs or transphobic people) not interact (like, reblog) with their

post. Still, largely, Tumblr users see other users as the authority on what nonbinary lesbian is and who can use it. This authority is diffuse, but very much needed as a significant portion of posts pertaining to gender and sexual identity fall into a category I refer to as ‘Advice Giving and Advice Seeking’. Authority on information and experience related to gender and sexual identity was leveraged using discursive strategies of positivity and validity.

Positivity is a cultural trend that exceeds Tumblr alone but was prevalent in posts made to #nonbinary lesbian that related to nonbinary lesbian gender and sexual identity. The modern, internet concept of positivity relates to an influx of messages and attitudes that insist on ‘finding the silver lining’ or adopting a more grateful or ‘positive’ outlook toward the world.¹⁶¹ This positivity is characterized as healing and helpful, in the face of an internet very much rife with cyberbullying and trolling, negative behaviors. Critics of the unbridled ‘positivity’ wave characterize aspects of the phenomenon as toxic in demanding that people must reject negative, complex emotions for shallow, surface level positive emotions.¹⁶² Users will post phrases such as “nonbinary positivity”, or post sunny, idyllic pictures with captions that insist on how “amazing” nonbinary lesbians are. Validity is a related concept that came up oftentimes alongside positivity. Validity refers to the reality or legitimacy of one’s experience (particularly their gendered and/or sexual experience) in this context.

¹⁶¹ Dazed, “How ‘Toxic Positivity’ Took over the Internet,” Dazed, August 4, 2021, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/53737/1/how-toxic-positivity-took-over-the-internet>.

¹⁶² Dazed.



Figure 3. A post defending the validity of female-aligned nonbinary people. Image by to-teen-girl, "Dear female aligned enbies," February 7, 2020. <https://to-teen-girl.tumblr.com/post/190697453629//dear-female-aligned-enbies-youre-as-much-a-girl>

This post centers individual experience as the determiner for what is 'valid'. While the post outright characterizes the broader LGBTQ community as a diverse place available for all, the defense of female-aligned nonbinary people (and tagging related identities, including nonbinary lesbian) implicitly insinuates that many do not think nonbinary lesbianism is valid. It defines an inner and outer culture, as well as the fluidity of personal experience, while enforcing a singular vision of validity: that it is what one makes of it. Both positivity and validity are discursive strategies utilized to defend the nonbinary lesbian label. Invocations of positivity and validity were prevalent in posts seeking advice

about taking on a nonbinary lesbian label and questions seeking to understand the label (from both those who did or did not believe in the label's validity at the onset).

In fact, the first Tumblr post tagged with nonbinary lesbian, made on February, 26th 2016, hinges itself on this concept of validity. User sapphictopia-blog posted:

Nonbinary women who love other women (whether exclusively nonbinary women or not) are so valid. The love we carry is not lesser because of our genders and our relationship to womanhood is no lesser either.¹⁶³

This post marks the first of many which rely on the concept of validity as a means of defending a particular identity (what I call 'label defense' in my data). It is also the first of many that suggests that a relationship or alignment with "womanhood" is an aspect of nonbinary women loving women, or nonbinary lesbian, identity. There is also the implicit suggestion embedded in this first post that an outside audience disapproves of the concept of nonbinary women who love other women. That this is the first post on the tag does not mean that nobody ever typed the word prior on Tumblr (in fact, these posts possibly indicate that people did), but it does mean that nobody was tagging it as such. In essence, a nonbinary lesbian Tumblr community did not exist yet. However, its invocation became necessary for a cluster of people who needed to express themselves over Tumblr. Whereas at The Country it was the material space that provided permission to feel 'okay', to feel 'right', and to 'be ourselves', on #nonbinary lesbian it is the invocation and defense of gender and sexual terminology, via peers, that validates that feeling of 'it is okay to be me, and express myself in this way that I desire.'

¹⁶³ sapphictopia-blog, "A Place For Us," Tumblr, *A Place For Us* (blog), accessed September 6, 2021, <https://sapphictopia-blog.tumblr.com/post/140035249663/nonbinary-women-who-love-other-women-whether>.

Overview: User creations

Users create, share, and reblog creations that represent or associate with gender and sexual identities, most often of course the nonbinary lesbian identity. This, obviously, stands out a great deal from the practices of The Country. Women would gather for parties and different holiday related events, invite women's musicians, and sometimes even raised money for different women's-related causes, but there was not an emphasis placed on the creation of artifacts for the expression of lesbian identity. Lesbian identity, there, was expressed simply through the act of the opportunity to socialize with fellow women. Tumblr, as a digital space, appropriately requires visual expressions in order to convey that message ('I am a fellow peer, a fellow nonbinary lesbian') to others. Some creations are text based (say, a sassy text meme), and some visual (such as a custom Word Art gif), as Tumblr's blogging platform features both text and images heavily. I divided all the user creations posted into the following categories: graphic art, selfies, and writing that was created and posted by Tumblr users. Selfies were by far the most common user creation, numbering at 593. Next came graphic art, at 325. Approximately 191 of the selfies were accompanied by a textual pronouns caption such as, in descending order in frequency, they/them, she/they, he/him, and he/they. The pronoun captions, as well as all the selfie posts being tagged to #nonbinary lesbian at all, indicates significant textual linkages to a particular gender or sexual identity.

Similarly, graphic art contributions, such as moodboards, stimboards, and icons, were also consistently (as in, every time) conveyed as or related to a specific gender or sexual identity. However, much differently from the selfies, these relations were

established via gendered associations surrounding sound, color, mood, and texture rather than by a textual invocation of “they/them.” Moodboards are digital collages designed to invoke a particular mood or feeling. Stimboards are also digital collages designed to invoke a particular mood or feeling, though they typically feature gifs that emphasize tactile texture, whereas moodboards tend to be comprised of still images. The typical Tumblr moodboard features three rows of three equally sized images arranged in a square. Users created moodboards on Tumblr to represent a manner of things, from astrological signs to the ‘feeling’ of spending the summer in Italy. Users, some of whom run blogs that focus exclusively on this kind of service, will also create moodboards related to gender and sexual identity, such as a nonbinary lesbian moodboard:



Moodboard of a non-binary lesbian

Figure 4. A collage of nine images intended to represent a nonbinary lesbian. Notice that the stripes of different flowers in the centermost image represent the colors of the nonbinary flag (yellow, white, purple, and black). Image by lovelyqueers, “Moodboard of a non-binary lesbian,” September 11, 2018. <https://lovelyqueers.tumblr.com/post/179932954623/moodboard-of-a-non-binary-lesbian>

This moodboard conveys a punk, defiant, very Zoomer ‘pseudo retro’ vision of nonbinary lesbianism. One image declares “my birth certificate may say girl but I sure as hell ain’t one.” This is a pattern I refer to as ‘not an X’—when an individual makes a statement of identity via a negative sentence construction (I am not X) rather than a positive sentence construction (I am an X). Other aspects emphasized on this moodboard are angst (via the two images of faulty neon signs with moody mixed messages stuck between seemingly aspirational to happy but secretly sad), and statements that destabilize

the gender binary (“clothing has no gender”). Users, like the one that created this moodboard and shared it to the nonbinary lesbian tag for others to use, make, request, and reblog moodboards like digitally enshrined Pride merchandise. The graphics tend to be very individualized, as users will request a moodboard of a particular theme (a nonbinary lesbian moodboard with night sky vibes, or a pastel nonbinary lesbian moodboard) from a blog that creates moodboards, and that request will be fulfilled and posted. Graphic art is shared as a means of individual expression and community interaction and affirmation.

The same happens with other graphic art created by users, including icons or simply general custom graphics. Icons are another popular category of graphic art shared on the nonbinary lesbian tag. All tumblr users have an icon or “userpic” that represents them or their interests. Sometimes it may be a selfie, other times it will be that user’s favorite character or simply just an image they enjoy. There are countless blogs across Tumblr that create and share icons for other Tumblr users to use. A subset of those icons includes those that pertain to a specific gender and sexual orientation as well as fandom. Sometimes these fandom / identity related icons may even assert that a specific fictional character belongs to an LGBTQ+ identity.

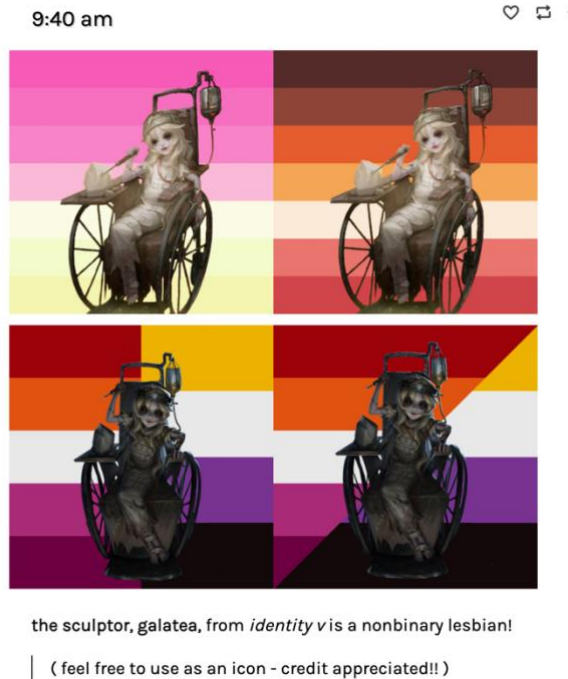


Figure 5. A pack of custom graphics that can be used as icons intended to represent a fictional character, galatea, as a nonbinary lesbian. Notice various lesbian and nonbinary flags behind the character. Image by yourfaveisalesbian, “the sculptor, galatea, from *identity v* is a nonbinary lesbian,” September 11, 2018.
<https://lovelyqueers.tumblr.com/post/179932954623/moodboard-of-a-non-binary-lesbian>

I refer to fandom-related icon posts such as the instance above ‘This character is a X.’ The often feature that literal statement, and sometimes feature different flags (of course the nonbinary lesbian flag was most prominent, considering the tag) to emphasize the impression that this character identifies as whatever LGBTQ+ identity. Not unlike moodboards and stimboards, icons associate gender and sexual identity with a particular ‘vibe’. In the case of these icons, the ‘vibe’ of nonbinary lesbianism is represented

through a fictional character, and however users interpret that fictional character. These icons, especially with their fandom emphasis, express and validate gender and sexual identities. *This character I/we like is a nonbinary lesbian, so therefore it is valid, therefore I am valid, therefore I am connected.*

Another sizeable portion of graphic art posts featured pride flags for different identities (such as a nonbinary lesbian pride flag) or sub identities (such as a nonbinary stargender lesbian pride flag). Like with moodboards, stimboards, and icons, some users devote their entire blogs to creating flags, whereas others create and post a spare flag here and there rather than devoting their whole blog to flags. Some users post these flags after spontaneous inspiration strikes, whereas others create flags on the basis of other Tumblr users' requests.



My nonbinary ace lesbian flag (click for better quality) ^^

Free to use as long as you don't fit my DNI!

#asexual #nonbinary #lesbian #ace lesbian #nonbinary lesbian
#ace nonbinary #my flags

91 notes Sep 28th, 2020



Figure 6. A user offers up a nonbinary ace lesbian flag that they made, for those who do not fit in their DNI or 'do not interact'. Image by mireland-isnt-allocishet, "My nonbinary ace lesbian flag (click for better quality) ^^" September 28, 2020. <https://miraland-isnt-allocishet.tumblr.com/post/630525264064118784/nonbinary-ace-lesbian-flag-by-me-free-to-use>

Flags like these are liked and reblogged by individuals who ascribe to those identities, or simply individuals who want to broadcast their support of a particular gender identity to those that follow their blog.

Conclusion

Nonbinary lesbian identity straddles two different subjects, respectively, the postmodern subject and the modern subject, by combining nonbinary, a term whose direct antecedent, genderqueer, hails from queer zines of the 1990s, and lesbian, an older term born from more essentialist and medicalized discourses of the 19th and 20th centuries. The modern subject and the postmodern subject are configured differently, and these different models both clash and coalesce over the course of five years of posts made to the nonbinary lesbian tag. The modern subject, reckoning with the rise of the state and populations, populations with natural processes in need of governance, is contrastingly quite measurable.¹⁶⁴ The modern subject is comprised of a series of quantifiable objects of rule that are knowable through science including, but not limited to, health, reproduction, and, of course, sexuality. The modern subject, particularly as it relates to sexuality, developed in part from the medical and psychiatric “specification of individuals”, as Michel Foucault puts it in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.¹⁶⁵ Sexologists of the 19th and 20th centuries taxonomized human sexual behavior, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s “invert” female (whose “masculine soul” was “heaving in the

¹⁶⁴ H.G. Cocks, “Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality,” *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 9 (2006): 1212.

¹⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 47.

feminine bosom”), and, in doing so, placed a range of behaviors under a microscope that rendered them intelligible, visible, and analyzable.¹⁶⁶ Sexual behavior does not simply reveal an aspect of the modern subject’s essence; sexual behavior reveals a concrete, embedded sexuality that *is* the modern subject’s essence.

The postmodern subject denies an innate and unchanging essence. The postmodern subject, reckoning with transformations in culture and a destabilization of modern identity, claims a fluid, fragmented self whose instability defies strictly defined social categories. I ascribe to Robert G. Dunn’s argument that postmodernism is “an attempt to articulate a growing sense of the problematization of identity as a generalized condition of life in postwar Western society.”¹⁶⁷ Dunn stipulates furthermore that whereas postmodernism is philosophical and theoretical mode of inquiry (particularly prevalent in academic discourse), postmodernity is a sociohistorical condition rooted in fundamental changes in production and consumption in Western culture.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, modernity, also, is a sociohistorical condition rooted in transformations in technology, science, and communication.¹⁶⁹ The work of queer theorists is particularly relevant when considering gender and sexuality through a postmodern lens. Queer theorists built on the work of John Gagnon and William Simon (1973)¹⁷⁰, Michel Foucault (1978), and reams

¹⁶⁶ Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study* (New York: Arcade Publishing, Inc., 1998), 264.

¹⁶⁷ Dunn, *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Dunn, 3.

¹⁶⁹ Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2005, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>.

¹⁷⁰ John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1973).

of feminist scholarship such as Adrienne Rich's critique of compulsory heterosexuality and, even earlier, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970)¹⁷¹. Queer theorists initiated the essentialism versus social construction debate regarding human sexuality and desire, very prominently Judith Butler (1990)¹⁷² and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991)¹⁷³. The concept of queer as the ultimate tool deconstruction, saddled with the power to peel back the illusion that sexuality exists as a core unwavering truth, accreted enough that an entire field of Queer Studies was established around it by the late 1980s and into the 1990s.

Lesbian has been, at times, perceived as chaffing with queer. Elizabeth Freeman refers to the relationship between lesbians, lesbian feminism, queer politics, and even some academic scholarship as a "temporal drag."¹⁷⁴ Freeman uses this term to indicate the gravitational pull that 'lesbian' and 'lesbian feminist' seems to exert on 'queer'. She refers to this as a deadweight that hearkens "back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of color, the working class, and the transgendered."¹⁷⁵ Queer theory privileges, she writes, "transformative differences not only across gender" but also "in the name of a radical

¹⁷¹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970).

¹⁷² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁷³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2010), 62.

¹⁷⁵ Freeman, 62.

future.”¹⁷⁶ Freeman relates this pattern more so as a temporal phenomenon, rather than a matter of “group identity.”¹⁷⁷

Nonbinary lesbian identity has accreted from an accumulation of varying discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and identity. Nonbinary lesbian identity has also inherited earlier tensions of essentialism, social construction, validity, bodies, politic, and more. Some of these are modern, some postmodern, originate from the internet, while others do not. Some of these discourses include academic feminist discourse, contemporary liberal feminist online discourse, lesbian discourse, and trans discourse and some of these mediums include internet blogging and academic publications. These discourses are both fragmented, meaning that they hail from disparate sources and mediums, and overlapping, meaning that they share some of the same relative conclusions. Nonbinary lesbian is a 21st century idea that stands at the discursive and affective crossroads of lesbian, queer, and transgender. The references to attachment, connection, and alignment with women or womanhood hint at a lesbian feminist sense of sisterhood, only without the more distinctly gendered ‘sister’ part. Nonbinary lesbian insists on the utility—for self-expression, and community building—of the word lesbian. The lesbians on this tag insist on the importance of their attraction to *and support* for women. They also insist that their attraction to women interacts with their gender identity, whether that attraction is the preservation factor in their “connection to womanhood”, or whether that attraction in fact causes them to feel like a “different

¹⁷⁶ Freeman, 62.

¹⁷⁷ Freeman, 62.

gender” than woman. In the following chapter, I continue to explore the implications of the topics, vocabularies, and discursive strategies I located within five years of posting to the nonbinary lesbian tag. I also consider the relationship between Tumblr’s nonbinary lesbians and broader societal contests about lesbian identity and community during a contemporary, queer era.

CHAPTER 4. Lesbian Post-Gender Identity: Desire Coordinates in a Fluid Future

In the previous two chapters I explored two different spaces: the material space of The Country women's bar, and the digital space of the nonbinary lesbian tag on Tumblr. I have defined lesbian space as rendered via lesbian desire, following Adrienne Rich's expansive concept of the lesbian continuum, in which lesbian desire encompasses a range of connections among women including familial, platonic, romantic, and sexual interactions. Women at The Country went to the bar for friendship, romance, dancing, and support with and from other women. This communal environment functioned as a lesbian space. Tumblr users on the nonbinary lesbian tag seek advice, validation, and support from other likeminded users. This participatory, communal environment, I argue, also functions as a lesbian space. The Country and the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag have many differences, especially considering they exist within different time periods and mediums, yet they also share a great deal through the lesbian desires that populated those spaces. The expression of these desires (for safety, belonging, authenticity, and, of course, for women) elucidate the way the conditions of space enable and disable different possibilities.

In this chapter, I outline in further detail these shared qualities between The Country and the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag. In addition, I argue that nonbinary lesbian identity, formed within the unique digital architecture of Tumblr, which encourages the proliferation of micro-identities and the accretion of communities around those terms, represents a specifically lesbian post-gender identity, one that permits individuals to express specificity of desire within a digital environment, and possibly even an era, that increasingly emphasizes queer ambiguity. A comparison between The Country oral

histories and #nonbinary lesbian Tumblr discourse elucidates the ways that nonbinary lesbian identity, and experience, necessitates a hybrid framework of modern/lesbian and postmodern/queer considerations for full comprehension.

Lesbian Spaces: Desire, Safety, and Authenticity

My analysis of oral histories with women who frequented The Country, and my computer-mediated discourse analysis of the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag, revealed a shared emphasis on safety. The Country was characterized as a safe haven by most, if not all, the interviewees I spoke with. Kathryn, one of the three founders, as stated before, described safety as the core of The Country. Women of The Country emphasized safety in a more physical sense. Many mentioned the fear of being seen, outed, by individuals from outside the community. The result of that could be, several of them said, job loss, or even physical violence. The Country, as a material location, could be physically infiltrated. The founders and members of The Country realized this mere weeks into The Country's existence, and instituted a members only (and friends of members only) policy. This is also inspired their decision to erect a wall inside the foyer, where there wasn't one previously, so that the dance floor would not be visible to outsiders stepping into the foyer (which connected with another business). Some patrons would even act as bouncers to make sure all zones of the establishment were safe, both inside the bar and outside in the parking lot. Patrons would look out for each other, too, making sure everybody got home afterward, and that those who had too much to drink had rides.

The #nonbinary lesbian Tumblr posts also emphasized safety, but in more linguistic, digital terms. This is understandable, considering the conditions of space are shaped by communities, and in turn shape communities. Sometimes this was accomplished by explicitly invoking the words ‘safe’ and ‘safety’, verbatim. Other times the desire for safety was invoked through vociferous defenses of nonbinary lesbian identity against detractors and/or the perception of detractors. Detractors against nonbinary lesbian identity were largely experienced as a threat to the mental health of nonbinary lesbians. For instance, in one post made to the tag during 2020, one user expressed the strong desire for “lesbians to have a safe community”, and also decries the notion that “weird ass ‘policing’ of nonbinary lesbian’s identities” can put “so many lesbians with complex relationships to their own gender vulnerable to harassment and bullying.”¹⁷⁸ This is an obvious reference to cyberbullying and internet harassment. Another post, this one from a different user during 2019, discussed the effects of such harassment. “Huge thanks to the assholes in Insta[gram] that sent me into a full blown panic attack by harassing me for identifying as a nonbinary lesbian.” Later, in that same post, this user sarcastically thanked those who harassed them for acting to keep the lesbian community “safe”, obviously insinuating that denying the validity of nonbinary lesbians is not safe for the broader lesbian community.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ ghiblipunk, “Ok...since This Post Is Extremely Popular, Right Now, I Just Wanna Say...,” *Ghibli Gothic* (blog), July 2, 2020, <https://ghiblipunk.tumblr.com/post/622538298340081664/oksince-this-post-is-extremely-popular-right>.

¹⁷⁹ enjoymygoodgoodopinions, ““Huge Thanks to the Assholes in Insta That Sent Me into a Full Blown Panic Attack,” *O Shit Its Opinion Time* (blog), June 17, 2019, <https://enjoymygoodgoodopinions.tumblr.com/post/185643409696/huge-thanks-to-the-assholes-in-insta-that-sent-me>.

Other expressions of safety related to an even more internal sense of comfort and belonging in terms of gender identity and experiences of gender. “oddly enough,” one user wrote, “the only time I feel comfortable with she\her pronouns or generally viewing myself as almost a girl is when I’m reminded that I’m a happy gf in love with my gf.”¹⁸⁰ This user professes that the only circumstances in which they can view themselves as ‘almost a girl’ is within the comfortable boundaries of a loving, romantic relationship with a girlfriend. This suggests there is a form of mutual understanding within a lesbian relationship that the rest of the world simply cannot accomplish. Whereas being viewed by others as a girl is uncomfortable, a lesbian relationship creates a bubble within which being a girl, or almost a girl, means something *different* than it means to the outside world. That same user concluded, “seeing the wlw positivity on here [the nonbinary lesbian tag] just makes me feel safe”, linking the feeling of safety with positive celebrations of women loving women.¹⁸¹ Interviewees who went to The Country also linked feelings of acceptance and positivity toward lesbian identity with feeling safe. One interviewee, Lezah, notes after expressing how being gay was not acceptable during that time period and that created an atmosphere of fear. However, together with one another in The Country, Lezah strongly felt “we were safe” from that lack of acceptance.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ bastilledna, “Oddly Enough, the Only Time I Feel Comfortable With...,” *Flower through Disarray* (blog), August 15, 2017, <https://bastilledna.tumblr.com/post/164231287214/oddly-enough-the-only-time-i-feel-comfortable>.

¹⁸¹ bastilledna, 2017.

¹⁸² Preston, Lezah. Interview by Adriana Sisko. The Country: Remembering Lexington’s First Lesbian Bar, Faulkner Morgan Archive and Kentucky Historical Society.

Expressions of safety were addressed to multiple groups, in addition to lesbians and nonbinary lesbians, on the tag. Several posts included a note at the bottom expressing “this post is safe for trans women”, an effort to signal affinity and allyship with trans women in general, regardless of their sexual preferences. One user discussed solely wishes for safety for various groups of lesbians in a 2017 post, writing, “Keep ace lesbians safe Keep nb lesbians safe Keep trans lesbians safe.”¹⁸³ This emphasis on safety reaches down into the tags, for many posts, with tags such as ‘trans safe’ and ‘lesbian safe’ popping up quite frequently.

The idea of ‘getting to be yourself’ or ‘being ourselves’, which was not uncommonly linked with notions of safety, was also a significant theme of The Country interviews. Most of the interviewees did not feel free to simply ‘be’ in spaces outside of The Country. For the women of The Country, it was the bar space itself that provided permission and opportunity to live authentically. Being themselves simply meant having fun and socializing together away from prying eyes, for the most part.

Notions of authenticity and the true self were also prevalent in the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr posts. Invocations of the authentic self, or requests for validation of authenticity, were most frequently tied into gender identity, and were bolstered via discursive strategies of validity and positivity. For some of my interviewees, The Country was described as a place that allowed them, or told them, that it was okay for them to be ‘who you are.’ The physical location, essentially, permitted authentic expression. On the

¹⁸³ Igbtqiapostivity, “Keep Ace Lesbians Safe Keep Nb Lesbians Safe Keep Trans Lesbians Safe,” *Positivity Is Still Here* (blog), January 20, 2020, <https://Igbtqiapostivity.tumblr.com/post/156137660449/keep-ace-lesbians-safe-keep-nb-lesbians-safe>.

nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag, a text-heavy digital environment, it is linguistic affirmations that validate authentic expression (here usually meaning the professing of a nonbinary lesbian identity). During 2020, one user submitted an ‘ask’, or message, to a trans affirmation blog. Tumblr is chock full of blogs devoted to positivity, validity, and affirmation of various gender and sexual identities, so such a message is not uncommon generally, and certainly not uncommon on #nonbinary lesbian. The user wrote, “I’m a genderfluid lesbian who sometimes uses he/him, and it’s super frustrating when people say he/him lesbians aren’t valid”¹⁸⁴ The Tumblr user running the trans affirmation blog responded with several paragraphs of the requested service saying, essentially, your identity as a genderfluid lesbian who uses he/him pronouns is valid. Affirmations of validity are rhetorical tools for bolstering the legitimacy of an identity (in this case, that of nonbinary lesbian identity) as well as for fostering community connection. Users rely on one another to feel that their identities are acceptable or real. Affirmations of validity and expressions of positivity were demonstrated within peer-to-peer interactions as well as broader, generalized posts directed to the nonbinary lesbian tag as a whole. One instance of this type of post from 2019 read, simply, as, “nonbinary lesbians are so mf valid, keep up the good work.”¹⁸⁵

Desire, in many forms, for women is also key to the lesbian spaces of The Country and #nonbinary lesbian. The Country was founded as a place where women

¹⁸⁴ Anonymous, “Please Could I Get He/Him And...,” *Little Trans Affirmations* (blog), October 28, 2020, <https://trans-affirmation.tumblr.com/post/633255629055836161/please-could-i-get-hehim-and-star-done-im-a>.

¹⁸⁵ cloudytblw, “Nonbinary Lesbians Are so Mf Valid...,” *Cloudynblw* (blog), July 21, 2020, <https://cloudynblw.tumblr.com/post/624251817620062209/nonbinary-lesbians-are-so-mf-valid-keep-up-the>.

could meet other women, socialize with other women, and all do so in an atmosphere of fun and safety. Other establishments in Lexington at the time were not meeting those needs, for some patrons of The Country, thus the establishment of the bar in the first place. As discussed earlier, this desire took many forms, from platonic companionship, to romantic companionship, to sexual hookups—all features on the spectrum of the lesbian continuum. Desire for women, most often in the form of declarations of attraction toward women or expressions of desire for a girlfriend, were also prominent on #nonbinary lesbian throughout 2016 to 2020. Expressions of attraction, in fact, were among the most common unifying themes. Users would post enthusiastic declarations such as "i'm so gay !! womennnn!!!! god i just love women i hope all women are having a good day"¹⁸⁶, to "can't wait to kiss my bae."¹⁸⁷ These declarations were most often linked with the desire to have companionship with women, as there were many posts both seemingly jokingly, and others quite seriously, seeking a partner

Sometimes these declarations of attraction were linked directly with nonbinary gender identity. One user wrote, during 2020, "Being a nonbinary lesbian is just. No I am not a girl. Yes I would love to be ur girlfriend."¹⁸⁸ This post represents a broader trend of

¹⁸⁶ adykeable, "I'm so Gay !! Womennnn!!!! God i Just Love Women," *Moth* (blog), October 27, 2020, <https://adykeable.tumblr.com/post/633103575829053441/im-so-gay-womennnn-god-i-just-love-women-i>.

¹⁸⁷ childish-himbino, "Can't Wait to Kiss My Bae. Run My Fingers Through..." *Tired & Enthusiastic* (blog), July 1, 2020, <https://childish-himbino.tumblr.com/post/622461136894361601/cant-wait-to-kiss-my-bae-run-my-fingers-through>.

¹⁸⁸ theflannelwizard, "Being a Nonbinary Lesbian Is Just..." *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Wed* (blog), October 21, 2020, <https://theflannelwizard.tumblr.com/post/632594329874104321/being-a-nonbinary-lesbian-is-just-no-i-am-not-a>.

posts that discuss identifying using they/them pronouns, and being nonbinary, but also making exceptions regarding gendered language as result of the safety provided within the safe, understanding bubble of a romantic relationship. This calls to mind another post, also from 2020, in which a different user simply stated, “My gender is lesbian.”¹⁸⁹ Another post from 2018 discusses this notion that there is a distinction between generalized desire for women, and specifically *lesbian* desire for women, and the relationship between lesbian desire and nonbinary lesbian gender identity. This user writes:

“[...] being a lesbian often comes with a disconnect from traditional womanhood, of which a lot was constructed by men and to be appealing to men, something which lesbians want to and do distance themselves from. this dysphoria can lead to us lesbians not identifying with traditional womanhood (and thus womanhood in general) at all, since we have our own understanding of it which most of society doesnt share. as a consequence, many of us would not identify as women and rather choose terms like trans and nonbinary (which some of us still do!), werent it for our lesbianism, which gives us a connection to womanhood in the sense that we feel we are women who love women, because we certainly arent men who love women, or nonbinary people with no connection to womanhood who love women. this part is hard to explain, but our love for women connects us to womanhod [sic], albeit not traditional womanhood. so we do not feel a connection to womanhood in the sense that it is our gender, but in the sense that it defines our interactions with other women. our interactions with women are those of women who love women and understand their experiences, but we still do not feel as “women” in the way that we are traditional women in society. so our

¹⁸⁹ jewishharley, “To the People Wondering Abt ‘My Gender Is Lesbian’ Posts...,” *Rakastun Uudelleen* (blog), April 18, 2018, <https://jewishharley.tumblr.com/post/173063057017/to-the-people-wondering-abt-my-gender-is-lesbian>.

lesbianism is our only connection to womanhood, and thus defines our gender, which isn't quite woman but also isn't quite not-woman.”¹⁹⁰

The theme of desire for women is prevalent in the #nonbinary lesbian posts. Desire for women is part of a repeated discursive strategy to explain, and therefore legitimate, nonbinary lesbian identity as both nonbinary and lesbian simultaneously. Desire for exclusively women on the part of lesbians is identified as lesbian desire and is also identified as distinct from the way men love women, and the way nonbinary people ‘with no connection to womanhood’ love women. It is the specificity of lesbian desire that inspires gender identity and potentially other gendered language, such as the gendered ‘girlfriend’ versus the more gender neutral ‘partner.’ The Country was a material lesbian space constructed for and maintained by social bonds between women. It was, quite literally, the very women that founded The Country that kept it running, pulling money out of their own pockets to keep the business afloat. Nonbinary lesbian identity, too, is constructed around bonds with women and an alignment with women via desire and experience.

Nonbinary Lesbian and the Queer Standard

I argue that nonbinary lesbian identity, formed within the unique digital architecture of Tumblr, which encourages the proliferation of micro-identities and the accretion of communities around those terms via the searchable tagging system,

¹⁹⁰ jewishharley, “To the People Wondering Abt ‘My Gender Is Lesbian’ Posts...,” *Rakastun Uudelleen* (blog), April 18, 2018, <https://jewishharley.tumblr.com/post/173063057017/to-the-people-wondering-abt-my-gender-is-lesbian>.

represents a specifically lesbian post-gender, one that permits individuals to express specificity of desire within a digital environment, and possibly even an era, that increasingly emphasizes more ambiguous and fluid sexual identities. Post-gender, here, refers to state beyond the gender binary, upon which constructs of gender are generally built. Nonbinary identity eschews the gender binary. I argue that nonbinary lesbian represents a specifically lesbian post-gender on three bases: 1) the nonbinary aspect moves away from the gender binary, which is the typical foundation of gender identity, 2) that substantial discourse surrounding nonbinary lesbian identity invokes lesbian desire as the primary determinant of gender identity, and 3) therefore nonbinary lesbian identity allows individuals to maintain specificity in order to best describe their desires and experiences within a digital environment, and perhaps even era, that emphasizes broad, ambiguous terms of sexuality and gender such as queer and nonbinary.

As I mentioned in earlier chapters, the alternative LGBTQ+ acronym MOGAI offers an alternative system of gender and sexual identity that decenters all ‘normative’ aspects of gender and sexual identity, those normative aspects being allosexuality, heterosexuality, being perioriented, cisgender, and dyadic. The terminologies that populate the MOGAI umbrella are innumerable. They allow for splitting between romantic and sexual attraction and allow for gender modalities beyond even the cisgender and transgender binary. It is permissible, too, for multiple terms to be stacked together to best convey the most accurate, specific linguistic expression of that individual’s gender and sexual experience. So, the broader structure of the communal labelling practices that nonbinary lesbians on Tumblr engage in are acceptable to many on Tumblr. However, there is one departure, which is the invocation of the word lesbian which is associated,

understandably, with the gender binary. It is also associated with specificity of sexual preference (meaning an attraction to women). In essence, nonbinary lesbian identity calls for a hybrid mindset that is both queer and lesbian in order to fully comprehend its intricate nuances.

Nonbinary lesbians identify their desire for women and alignment with women as the primary determinant of their gender identity. Unlike the women of The Country, who ultimately described biological sex as the bedrock of their identity, regardless of any added terms such as tomboy, nonbinary lesbian gender identity is not based upon assigned birth sex, *per say*, though it is frequently related to the social experience of being read and treated as a woman. Nonbinary lesbian identity is partially expressed, therefore, using communally agreed upon labelling conventions (Tumblr's micro-labelling habits). Nonbinary lesbian identity *also* partially defies Tumblr's labelling conventions by invoking lesbianism and, therefore, specific sexual preferences and associations with the binary (lesbian desire, alignment with womanhood, etc.). There was significant discourse on the nonbinary lesbian tag regarding detractors of the label in the form of inference and direct callouts. One 2020 post read:

Heads up to all my nonbinary lesbians out there...if someone doesn't understand how you can be nonbinary and a lesbian. Guess what? You don't owe them shit. It isn't your job to explain it to them or to prove your existence. You exist. We exist.¹⁹¹

The perception of disagreement with and denial of the validity of nonbinary lesbian identity is not unrooted from reality, considering the number of posts I spotted on the tag

¹⁹¹ nblesbianasks, "Heads up to All My Nonbinary Lesbians out There...," *Nonbinary Lesbian Asks* (blog), October 7, 2020, <https://nblesbianasks.tumblr.com/post/631304112981573632/heads-up-to-all-my-nonbinary-lesbians-out>.

that indicated as much, as well as popular think pieces outside of Tumblr. Nonbinary gender and sexual orientation labeling allows for LGBTQ+ individuals to express layered, nuanced descriptions of their desires and experiences. However, for the most part these identities are coined explicitly in defiance of the gender binary, whereas nonbinary lesbian does not eschew all vocabulary related to modern (rather than postmodern) iterations of gender and sexual identity which, again, nonbinary lesbian identity defies. The ‘queer enough’ standard is not a standard only for some Tumblr users, either.

I will pull an example from scholarship in order to illustrate the queer enough standard. Abigail Oakley published a fascinating article about nonbinary labelling practices on Tumblr titled “Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labelling on Tumblr” during 2016. In this article, Oakley explores the “About Me” pages of queer Tumblr users to study the community-accepted conventions of identity construction and labelling practices. Oakley’s piece is among the few of its kind that examines identity construction of nonbinary individuals on Tumblr and contains many useful insights. However, the manner with which Oakley describes the labelling practices of queer individuals on Tumblr explicitly suggests that she thinks there could be *better* labeling practices than those available on Tumblr at present. Oakley writes:

[...] this article discusses true self and nonbinary gender and sexual orientation labeling as forms of identity construction that allows LGBTQIA identifying individuals a method for nuanced descriptions of feelings and desires. However, *far from perfect* [emphasis added], these labeling practices are also grounded in hegemonic female/male, feminine/masculine binary discourse.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Abigail Oakley, “Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr,” *Social Media + Society* July-September (2016): 1.

Oakley is correct in stating that some of the nonbinary labeling practices on Tumblr are grounded in gender binaric discourse. I have no qualm with the factual quality of this observation, but I do take qualm with the phrase ‘far from perfect.’ I would be curious to know what perfect labelling practices look like. ‘Far from perfect’ indicates a value judgement and indicates that the current labelling practices *could* be perfect, were they different, or at the very least simply better. I view these practices as brilliant and inventive. I do not view these practices simply as ‘not perfect’, as if ‘perfect’ articulations of identity exist. It is also interesting to wonder how ‘not perfect’ the labelling practices of the women of The Country would seem through this lens of the queer standard. We live in a world in which the gender binary is still very much a force in the lived experience of individuals, so what does it mean that referencing the binary puts us, degree by degree, further away from perfection? I wonder if, perhaps, perfect labelling practices would take place someplace beyond gender, as sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters has discussed. Writing about queer theory and queerness as a political value, Walters argues, “[...] queerness is theorized as somehow beyond gender, a vision of a sort of transcendent polymorphous perversity deconstructing as it slips from one desiring/desired object to the other. But this forgets the very real and felt experience of gender that women, particularly, live with quite explicitly.”¹⁹³ Nonbinary lesbians, regardless of assigned birth sex, related their identities to the felt experience of gender not infrequently, including discussing how uncomfortable it is to be identified as a woman/girl in public. Therefore, one must take on a hybrid perspective, someplace both

¹⁹³ Suzanna Danuta Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can’t a Woman Be More like a Fag?),” *Signs* 21, no. 4 (1996): 844.

and in between queer and lesbian in order to understand the construction of nonbinary lesbian identity.

Adam Isaiah Green, sociologist, provides a fascinating model for hybrid thinking surrounding sexual and gender identity theory's deconstructionist tendencies in, "Gay but Not Queer: Toward a Post-Queer Study of Sexuality."¹⁹⁴ Green acknowledges that the study of sexuality has undergone a paradigm shift due to the advent and continued legacy of queer theory, and that this has wrought benefits for the field of sociology by encouraging scholars to critically examine the cultural production of sexual identity and to politicize and decenter discourses of normative gender and sexuality. Green is also attentive to the limitations of a queer approach to studying sexuality, writing, "[...] despite its laudable ambition and broad academic appeal, queer theory tends to lapse into a discursively burdened, textual idealism that glosses over the institutional character of sexual identity and the shared social roles that sexual actors occupy. [...] As a consequence, queer theory constructs an undersocialized "queer" subject with little connection to the empirical world and the sociohistorical forces that shape sexual practice and identity."¹⁹⁵ Green identifies two strains of queer theory, referring to one as radical deconstructionism, and the other radical subversion, and examines the ways these strains "superimpose a postmodern self-concept onto the homosexual subject, thereby glossing over the enduring institutional organization of sexuality" and "superimposes a politically marginal self-concept onto the homosexual subject, thereby grossly oversimplifying

¹⁹⁴ Adam Isaiah Green, "Gay but Not Queer: Toward a Post-Queer Study of Sexuality," *Theory and Society* 31, no. 4 (2002): 521–45.

¹⁹⁵ Green, 523.

complex developmental processes attendant to sexual identification” respectively.¹⁹⁶ The former (“superimpose a postmodern self-concept onto the homosexual subject”) is exactly why, in my chapter focusing on *The Country* interviews, I refer to interviewees simply as women, rather than ‘identifying as’ women, as ‘I identify as’ was not the phrasing interviewees used and is a distinctly postmodern self-concept. Green discusses these effects of these strains of queer theory as systemic theoretical flaws endemic to queer theory as a project.

Green represents the first deconstruction strain primarily via the work of Judith Butler, David Halperin, and Annamarie Jagose, discussing the ways that these queer scholars both challenge categories on of sexual orientation on epistemic grounds and reprove the articulation of sexual orientation and, more or less, call for their dissolution as part of a revolutionary project. Afterward, Green provides examples of lesbian and gay histories that cannot be understood using such a radically deconstructionist framework, such as Esther Newton’s lesbian ethnography *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*, in which Newton examines three diverse generations of lesbians (the ‘Ladies, middle and upper class women, the ‘Dykes, mostly comprised of working class Jewish and Italian women, and the ‘Postfeminists’, who engaged in more heterosexual conventions such as makeup) were inspired to travel to Cherry Grove. Green argues that they were “first and foremost responding to the sexual organization of their societies” as lesbian orientation marginalized within the social context of their origins.¹⁹⁷ Inevitably, this calls to mind *The Country*, where a group of

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 527.

women explicitly in response to the gendered and sexual organization of their society founded a space for lesbians and queer women to be themselves. Categories of sexual orientation were embodied in institutions of marriage and kinship and structure of social control, which compelled a self-concept of sexual identification and in turn created “a community, congruent with classifications of sexual orientation.”¹⁹⁸

Green represents the second strain of queer theory, radical subversion, primarily by examining the work of Michael Warner, which Green argues defines queer “as a distinct subject-position” that positions gay and lesbian individuals at the margins of social order.¹⁹⁹ Green disagrees with this, arguing that “homosexual and heterosexual individuals draw from similar social roles available to them in a given historical period” and that characterizing the way gay and lesbian individuals “draw from constructions of masculinity and femininity that hold currency in the course of the local social exchange” as a subversive project represents “a gross oversimplification of more complex social processes”, meaning, the multiple levels of sociohistorical forces that configure into constructions of self-concept.²⁰⁰

Green ultimately concludes that these strains of queer theory result in an underdeveloped analysis on the interaction between the social and the sexual and obscure the attachment between institutionalized identities and sexual marginality, ultimately obscuring how highly consequential sexual classifications are in the development of self-

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 533.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 534.

concept. The modern conception of sexual identity (as a totalizing, categorizable inner truth) has not dissipated, Green notes, and maintains relevance in the lived experiences of individuals. Green calls for scholars to “recognize the expanding salience of sexual classifications for the construction of self, regardless of their convictions regarding the etiology of sexual orientation.”²⁰¹ In response, Green advocates for a post-queer approach to studying sexuality in which both queer theory, with its deconstructionist questioning, and the “grounded footing of empirical sociology”, with its emphasis on the multiple sociohistorical factors that factor into self-concept, are maintained simultaneously.²⁰² Identities such as nonbinary lesbian identity call for such an approach.

Conclusion

Comparing the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr posts with the oral histories of women who went to The Country elucidates nonbinary lesbian identity’s dual rooting in both modern/lesbian, and postmodern/queer, modes of identity. Nonbinary lesbian identity is a hybrid construction that configures nonbinary post-gender together with the lived experience of lesbian desire. While nonbinary lesbians do eschew the gender binary on one front (in ascribing to a nonbinary gender identity), they also harken to the lived experience of living in a society that is, in fact, not post-gender. Nonbinary lesbians discuss feeling alienated by a world that sees them as not ‘traditional women’ due to their attraction to women, and lack of attraction to men. This is the experience of interacting with the effects of the gender binary. The discourse on #nonbinary lesbian and the oral

²⁰¹ Ibid., 540.

²⁰² Ibid., 524.

histories of women from The Country overlapped significantly on themes of desire for safety, authenticity, and women. This demonstrates the way that still, across decades, these desires continue to be relevant to those drawn to the signifier of lesbian.

Nonbinary lesbian identity represents a means for individuals to express their desires and experiences with the specificity of lesbian desire, a shared desire, rather than more ambiguous terms of sexual identity, such as queer. This demonstrates how, only for some, queer simply cannot cover what lesbian can. Nonbinary lesbian identity allows nonbinary individuals to invoke the experience of being read as ‘woman’, while not identifying as a woman (as so often nonbinary lesbian discourse on Tumblr discusses the feeling of not being a ‘traditional’ woman due to lesbian desire). After all, *is* this something simply ‘queer’ or ‘nonbinary’ alone can communicate? Individuals are able to form communities, such as that of the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr tag, using the coordinates of the anchor term nonbinary lesbian. Like Cherry Grove, nonbinary lesbians arrive at the tag because of a shared preference for women. Lesbians, and historical personages that we now retroactively consider to be relevant to that construct, have a long, rich history of gender non-conformity. It comes as no surprise that lesbian gender variance continues as LGBTQ communities continue to shift and evolve. In the next chapter, I conclude and consider the evolution of lesbian identity along perceptions that lesbian identity has *not* evolved to catch up with “queer,” as evidenced in discourse surrounding lesbian bar closures.

CHAPTER 5. Conclusion: The Endurance of the Lesbian

In this concluding chapter, I analyze popular culture discourse surrounding by lesbian bar closures in which tension between ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’ are invoked. Then, I consider the continued utility of the term lesbian as the generalized term queer continues to become more prevalent as a means of invoking the specificity of lesbian desire, and the continued relevance of lesbian today as lesbian identity and concepts continue to evolve. I end by considering the key points of my research concerning nonbinary lesbians as well as the limitations of my methods and approach.

Lesbians and Reputation

Before discussing narratives of impossibility between a convergence of lesbian and queer, I must provide context surrounding the state of the term lesbian today, and the roots of the unsavory associations that term can call to mind (still), particularly the association with transphobia. Jill Gutowitz, lesbian writer and humorist, reflects on her journey to becoming proud to call herself a lesbian after years of fearing the word. “I never wanted to be a lesbian,” Gutowitz writes.²⁰³ She describes how, for years after she came out, she tried to be anything but a lesbian, a word she had resented for ten years due to associating the word with “negative stigma.” After working through that, Gutowitz then acknowledges the “stigma and backlash” she still faces today because “TERFs have stained the word ‘lesbian’ with their exclusionary vitriol. [...] ‘Lesbian’ is *not* an exclusionary word.” This is an association I am personally aware of, and clearly others,

²⁰³ Jill Gutowitz, “This Is the First Lesbian Visibility Day That I’m Proud to Call Myself a Lesbian,” *Them*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.them.us/story/lesbian-visibility-day>.

and it demands acknowledgement. The acronym TERF was first used online by Viv Smythe, a cisgender radical feminist blogger, during 2008. Smythe is often credited as coining the term, but she has stated that she suspects she is merely the first person to use the term online. She employed the term as “shorthand to describe one cohort of feminists who self-identify as radical and are unwilling to recognize trans women as sisters, unlike those of us who do”.²⁰⁴ Since, Smythe claims, the useful acronym has left her hands and has been weaponized by both those who advocate for trans-inclusion and those who advocate for trans exclusion.” Interestingly, Smythe has mentioned another term which did not catch on the way TERF did, which she thinks may describe this trans-exclusionary cohort of individuals better. “After a bit more reading,” Smythe writes, “I think I think the trans-exclusionary set should better be described as TES, with the S standing for separatists. A lot of the positions that are presented seem far too essentialist to be adequately described as feminist, let alone radical feminist.” Feminists now known as TERFs include Janice Raymond, Sheila Jeffreys, Germaine Greer, and Mary Daly. Raymond wrote *The Transsexual Empire*, in which she asserts that trans women “rape women’s bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact.”²⁰⁵

Sometimes other lesbian feminists or radical feminists are lumped in under the TERF umbrella as a group, but some activists and scholars disagree with this. Cristan Williams, trans studies scholar, argues that the flattening of the history of radical

²⁰⁴ Viv Smythe, “I’m Credited with Having Coined the Word ‘Terf’. Here’s How It Happened,” November 28, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/29/im-credited-with-having-coined-the-acronym-terf-heres-how-it-happened>.

²⁰⁵ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (United Kingdom: Teachers College Press, 1994), 104.

feminism into a “bitter battle against trans people” has obscured its “courageous history of radical trans inclusion”, asserting that conflating transphobic ideology with radical feminism “erases the voices of numerous radical feminist opinion leaders”.²⁰⁶ John Stoltenberg, feminist activist and life partner of radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, expressed shock that a *radical* feminist could favor an essentialist theory of sex over “a theory of ‘sex class’ as set forth in the work of Wittig, Dworkin, and MacKinnon.”²⁰⁷

The history of feminism is pocketed with discrimination against trans people particularly trans women, as well as powerful defenses. This is especially the case for the radical feminist movement of the 1970s into the 1980s. Among the most relevant examples of this complicated history is Beth Elliott, a trans lesbian folk singer and feminist activist, and the way she was treated by different lesbian feminist groups and organizations. Beth Elliott faced considerable vitriol at the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference where she was scheduled to perform a song. The day she took to the stage, members of the lesbian separatist Gutter Dykes Collective protested Elliott’s presence on the basis of her assigned sex (accusing her of being a man and, therefore, unwelcome).²⁰⁸ Robin Morgan, feminist poet and the conference’s keynote speaker, in an audience of over 1,200 feminists, denounced Elliott as an “obscenity” and an opportunistic “destroyer.”²⁰⁹ Those present voted on Elliott’s inclusion in the conference. While accounts of the margin in favor vary, ultimately, the vote decided that Elliott should stay.

²⁰⁶ Cristan Williams, “Radical Inclusion,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 255.

²⁰⁷ Williams, 254.

²⁰⁸ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Italy: Seal Press, 2008), 103.

²⁰⁹ Stryker, 104.

Elliott performed one song but left for the remainder of the conference. Elliott also served as the vice-president for the San Francisco chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis until she, and any other trans women thereafter, were disallowed from the organization based on a member vote on the basis of assigned sex.²¹⁰ While the DOB had expelled Elliott, other lesbian feminist organizations opposed their decision. The Tide Collective, a lesbian feminist organization that published the magazine *lesbian tide*, voted to include trans women in their organization and send an urgent telegram to the members of the DOB. “Those who vote no tonight vote with our oppressors. Those who vote yes recognize that none of us is free unless all of us are free. Please advise our transsexual sisters that, if they are not welcome in the liberal city of San Francisco, they are most welcome in the city of Los Angeles.”²¹¹ The DOB, as an organization, did not change their policy.

More recently, there has been a surge of vehemently anti-trans feminist-identified groups actively campaigning against legal protections for trans individuals. While the U.S. has no shortage of anti-trans sentiment and action, most commonly perceived as coming from right wing beliefs, the U.K. has been noted as a hotbed of bigoted anti-trans feminism. Different self-avowed feminist groups argue that women’s rights are at risk due to increased legal and social protections for trans individuals, argue that trans men are dupes, and that trans women are invaders. This movement has roots in the late 20th, early 21st century British “Skepticism” movement, which identified postmodernism in

²¹⁰ Stryker, 101.

²¹¹ Miriam Abelson, “Already Feminists: Transfeminist Histories, Hurdles, and Futures,” in *Nevertheless, They Persisted: Feminisms and Continued Resistance in the U.S.* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2018).

English universities as anti-British nonsense.²¹² Author J.K. Rowling has become something of a face for this British feminist variation of transphobic bigotry, coming under fire for different tweets and statements of hers that, some argue, deny the personhood of trans women. J.K. Rowling and others in this movement are not lesbians, but other members of this movement certainly are. *The Telegraph* published an article during 2020 discussing the LGB Alliance, a British coalition considered by some to be a hate group, titled, “Lesbians facing ‘extinction’ as transgenderism becomes pervasive, campaigners warn.”²¹³ The thinking here is curiously similar to white supremacist thought, in which ethnonationalists insist that white people will go ‘extinct’ or be ‘replaced’ by people of color.

Yet another example is the growing online community of ‘gender critical’ feminists, some of whom label themselves TERFs, some of whom view TERF as a misogynistic slur.²¹⁴ Jennifer Earles, sociologist, argues that whereas some social movements tear down new boundaries, the clash between trans-exclusionary feminists and trans-inclusionary feminists produces “new boundary or TERF wars.”²¹⁵ As discourse about gender and sexuality proliferate online, Earles observes, trans-

²¹² Sophie Lewis, “How Feminism Became Anti-Trans,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html>.

²¹³ Camilla Tominey, “Lesbians Facing ‘Extinction’ as Transgenderism Becomes Pervasive, Campaigners Warn,” *The Telegraph*, December 25, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/25/lesbians-facing-extinction-transgenderism-becomes-pervasive/>.

²¹⁴ Jennifer Earles, “TERF Wars: Narrative Productions of Gender and Essentialism in Radical-Feminist (Cyber)Spaces” (University of South Florida, 2017), 16.

²¹⁵ Earles, 2.

exclusionary feminists work to “solidify the borders surrounding their theories and communities even more.” This perpetuation of boundary and exclusion scorches across the internet from Tumblr, to Twitter, from Facebook, to Reddit. The legacy and resurgence of trans-exclusionary rhetoric on the part of feminists has shaded lesbianism as an identity for younger generations plugged into the internet. It behooves me to acknowledge there are some historical roots to this, thus this context.

That said, it is striking to consider the shifting place of the lesbian. The lesbian has been in a precarious position for some time, and the lesbian’s position within feminism has changed era by era. Bonnie J. Morris, women’s historian, shares a vision in *The Disappearing L* that speaks to this, writing:

Right now, many female activists in their forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies, and eighties are gazing thoughtfully into the glowing embers of lesbian culture. [...] Such images of heat and spark have always served to symbolize shifts in leadership; think of that other fire-based metaphor, the *passing of the torch*—presumably, to a next generation. What does it mean if that next generation is disdainful of the torch, welcomes its dousing, or lacks the data or the will to learn how it was lit and carried forward in the first place?²¹⁶

Morris largely focuses on what she terms the ‘cultural extinction’ of the lesbian activism, art, music, and performance networks of the 1970s through the 1990s. It is certain that lesbian feminist culture enjoyed more prominence throughout those decades relative to the present day. As Arlene Stein, sociologist, writes during 1997, the “once clear connection between lesbianism and feminism, in which the former was assumed to grow naturally out of the latter, is not all clear today.” Stein reflects on the state of lesbian identity politics in “The Incredible Shrinking Lesbian World and Other Queer

²¹⁶ Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 178.

Conundra”, written during 2010. Stein considers recent claims of a disappearing lesbian world, specifically with regard to the increasing numbers of lesbians who come to identify as transgender men. Stein appropriately questions the root of this fear, asking, “Isn’t feminism supposed to be about self-determination, and women’s right to do with their bodies what they wish?”²¹⁷ She historicizes this fear, though, pointing out its similarity to the pattern of women who became involved in feminism during the 1970s, became “captivated by lesbianism”, then “during the following decade” realized that they “were in fact primarily attracted to men.”²¹⁸ While lesbian feminists of the time saw potential for a lesbian in all women, they also saw the process of realizing lesbianism as unidirectional. “One would renounce one’s false, heterosexual self in order to come out as gay or lesbian. [...] They didn’t imagine that individuals might choose to reverse the political logic of coming out, and that for some women, lesbianism might only be a phrase on the way to heterosexuality – or even maleness.” Stein concludes that contemporary fears of lesbians coming to identify as transgender men are “like earlier” ones about lesbians going straight in that they trigger “anxieties about the loss of community, of people leaving the lesbian world, and the fear that it is shrinking and even possibly dying.”²¹⁹ While Stein identifies the explicitly transphobic elements of these fears, she does not declare fears about ‘disappearing’ lesbians as wholly a fabrication on the linguistic level, and acknowledges that the 21st century is witnessing a powerful shift in concepts of communities united solely through shared sexual preference. This calls to

²¹⁷ Arlene Stein, *Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 85.

²¹⁸ Stein, “The Incredible Shrinking Lesbian World and Other Queer Conundra,” 23.

²¹⁹ Stein, 24.

mind the mass closures of lesbian bars in recent years. How does discourse surrounding lesbian bar closures reflect a certain lesbian reputation for bigotry?

Lesbian Bars and the Queer Antidote

Public lesbian space has changed the time of The Country to the timespan of the nonbinary lesbian Tumblr posts sampled for this dissertation. Notions of gender and sex, too, have also changed. Julie Podmore, geographer, notes the way lesbians shifted away from lesbian feminism during the 1980s and began to gravitate toward queer forms of identification during the 1990s in her study on the gendered consolidation of queer space in Montréal. She relates this to women's and lesbian bars, writing that such establishments "could not respond to new market demands from a generation of women who saw themselves as both lesbian and queer."²²⁰ This shift held important implications for lesbian bar cultures. Podmore discusses the ways that gender asymmetry has impacted the production of queer territory, remarking on the way that it "resulted in the multiplication of queer and gay male night life" but also contributed to the "loss of women-only bars" as lesbians integrated into queer commercial space.

The Country was Lexington's only bar devoted to lesbians and queer women. After its closure during 1982, while there were queer spaces that were lesbian-owned or had a more 'lesbian vibe', there was never, and never has been since, a *specifically* women's bar in Lexington. Kentucky is not the only region of the United States without a lesbian bar in 2021. Since the 2010s, there have been a slew of articles across the internet about the 'disappearance' of lesbian bars across the nation over the course of the past

²²⁰ Julie A. Podmore, "Gone 'Underground'? Lesbian Visibility and the Consolidation of Queer Space in Montréal," *Social & Cultural Geography* 7, no. 4 (2006): 621, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360600825737>.

couple decades. Bars for lesbians were disappearing, whereas gay male and mixed bars were not, some said. The theories presented included the gentrification of neighborhoods, the number of lesbian couples living below the poverty line, the notion that gay men (and men in general) have more access to social capital than women, that heterosexual clientele are increasingly interested in visiting bars that cater to gay men and mixed-gender crowds, and the rise of internet dating that allows many young queer people to forego relying on bars to meet others. A 2019 study by sociologist Greggor Mattson found that there may be as few as 15 lesbian bars remaining in the United States.²²¹ In comparison, there were over 200 lesbian bars during the 1980s, according to that same study.

The phenomenon of disappearing lesbian bars is certainly a complicated one, and the truth is, lesbian bars are not alone. Mattson's study relied on business listings to ascertain the number of queer bars and queer bar closures from 1977-2019. Overall, Mattson found that the queer bar listings between these years supported the popular perception of recent gay bar decline. Gay bar listings showed their largest percentage decline from 2012 to 2017, with that rate accelerating between 2017 and 2019. However, Mattson also found that, potentially, different types of queer establishments are affected either more or less severely than others. Bars serving women, bars serving people of color, and men's cruising bars, he argues, may have been disproportionately impacted as compared with queer bars that cater to white, gay, cisgender men. "While all gay bar

²²¹ Greggor Mattson, "Are Gay Bars Closing? Using Business Listings to Infer Rates of Gay Bar Closure in the United States, 1977–2019," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5, no. 1–2 (2019).

listings declined by 36.6 percent between 2007 and 2019, the number of listings for bars serving people of color declined by 59.3 percent, cruisy men’s bar listings declined by 47.5 percent, and bars for women declined by 51.6 percent.”²²² Mattson notes that there were always fewer lesbian bars than gay and mixed bars to begin with, such that any further decline in those numbers may have drastic impact for lesbian and queer women communities. “Between 2007 and 2019, lesbian bar listings shed 51.6 percent. Losing even one bar when the 2019 listings suggest only 15 in the entire country represents substantial loss, particularly if it is the only one serving a large region.”²²³

The conversation is still ongoing, with outlets such as The New York Times, Reuters, NBC News, Jezebel, Marie Claire, and more publishing articles about the dire state of lesbian bars in the United States. There was a resurgence of these articles during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it difficult for businesses overall to survive, but especially local LGBTQ+ businesses. A 2021 article published by Julie Compton of NBC focuses on the financial struggle, and closure, of the Toasted Walnut, the last lesbian bar in Philadelphia. The Toasted Walnut opened during 2016 and initially had strong business. That is, until the COVID-19 pandemic. “The pandemic has exacerbated an already troubling trend for lesbian bars,” Compton observes.²²⁴ While lesbian bar numbers are incredibly low (sources differ, but usually state about 15 or 16 as of 2020), there are as many as 1,000 bars that cater to gay men and mixed-gender

²²² Mattson.

²²³ Mattson.

²²⁴ Julie Compton, “A Year into Pandemic, America’s Remaining Lesbian Bars Are Barely Hanging On,” NBC, April 4, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/year-pandemic-america-s-remaining-lesbian-bars-are-barely-hanging-n1262936>.

LGBTQ crowds. No doubt those 1,000 bars have also struggled, and perhaps even gone down in numbers since NBC's article, due to the pandemic, but the disparity between lesbian bars, and other queer bars, is large enough that it demands concern.

That is, for some. Others, not so much. Meg Ten Eyck discusses this in her article titled "Why are lesbian bars disappearing at the height of queer acceptance?"²²⁵ Eyck quickly references the range of speculations as to why lesbian bars are disappearing. "There have been several articles circulating the Internet discussing the "whys" surrounding the issue," Eyck writes, "[...] with everything from gentrification to more societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ people."²²⁶ Eyck then states that lesbian bars are a business model that try to "target less than 5% of the population" and adds that bars are capital intensive businesses which are hard for under-resourced communities to build and maintain because they require significant investment.²²⁷ The unspoken significance of the connection between profit and gay male spaces, and the lack of connection between profit and lesbian spaces, is not interrogated before Eyck declares:

Lesbian spaces that don't include people of color and trans people will disappear because they no longer speak to the values of the participants. We've already seen this happen with the end of Mitch Fest. The same separatist politics that are responsible for the rise of lesbian and gay bars also often uphold racist,

²²⁵ Meg Ten Eyck, "Why Lesbian Bars Are Disappearing At The Height Of Queer Acceptance?," Elite Daily, March 8, 2016, <https://www.elitedaily.com/life/lesbian-bars-queer-acceptance/1398823>.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

misogynist, classist and transphobic ideologies. While we need queer spaces, we also need queer spaces that are relevant to the needs of our most at-risk populations.²²⁸

In a way, Eyck's questioning title (why are *lesbian* bars disappearing at the height of *queer* acceptance?) answers itself. The title suggests that there is bafflement over the fact that lesbian bars are disappearing at the 'height of queer acceptance.' Yet, the body of the article resolves this conundrum by coolly assuming that lesbian spaces consistently fail to include all individuals and as such they run contrary to the kind of spaces the LGBTQ+ community needs, which are queer spaces. The implicit insinuation is that lesbian spaces, including bars, exist in a bigoted, outdated mode and thus do not fit into the queer era. Thus, the disappearance of lesbian bars throughout the 21st century is not framed as a tragedy, but as a natural step in the evolution toward a queer future. Queer represents progress and futurity, whereas lesbian bars drag (to play off Elizabeth Freeman's concept of temporal drag, referenced earlier in this dissertation) us back to a bigoted past in a way, I suppose, gay male spaces are incapable of.

It is difficult to know the most pertinent factors that have gone into the decline of lesbian bars, though increases in rent, gentrification, and the fact that women continue to make less than men (with even more significant gaps between women of color and white men, especially) are likely significant factors. That said, it is easy to identify discursive strategies that frame the disappearance of lesbian bars as an indication of progress, and frame lesbian as contradictory to queer. The degree to which this is true is debatable. In

²²⁸ Ibid.

an interview for the Lesbian Bar Project, Cori Dodson, a patron of The Lipstick Lounge, the only remaining lesbian bar in Nashville, stated that the establishment is “so much more than a bar owned by Lesbians for Lesbians.” Dodson underlines the establishment’s support of the whole queer community in Nashville, which has been recognized by the Human Rights Campaign.²²⁹ So many times, bar owners cater to a specific group, to the exclusion of others,” says Dodson, “but not at the Lipstick. They welcome everyone.”²³⁰ Lisa Cannistraci, the owner of New York’s oldest continuously running lesbian bar, Henrietta Hudson, which for now remains open, describes her bar as “an all-inclusive, lesbian-centric space.”²³¹ These are only two bars (of a small number of lesbian bars), so this does not contradict the history of racism and transphobia within the queer community, or lesbian communities, but it does indicate that the characterization of present day bars for lesbians and queer women as exclusive along bigoted lines is not accurate to the reality of all lesbian bars.

Reina Gattsuo of The Lily, a subdivision of The Washington Post that focuses on content relevant to millennial women, describes Henrietta Hudson as still very much a bar “made for and by queer women”, which is reflected in the “gender makeup” of the clientele but also in “less tangible ways, too” such as the “ease with which women have their arms around each other.”²³² Like Eyck, Gattsuo makes nods towards the idea of

²²⁹ “The Lipstick Lounge,” *Lesbian Bar Project*, n.d., <https://www.lesbianbarproject.com/lipstick-lounge>.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Reina Gattsuo, “Lesbian Bars Are Disappearing. We Spent a Night at One That’s Still Standing,” *The Lily*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.thelily.com/lesbian-bars-are-disappearing-we-spent-a-night-at-one-thats-still-standing/>.

²³² Gattsuo.

inclusion and exclusion, and their role in the decline of lesbian bars. Referring to this pattern, Gattsuo writes:

The transition is bittersweet for women who have spent their lives building lesbian spaces. Some historically lesbian spaces have their own histories of racism and trans exclusion; many think inclusion can only be a good thing.²³³

Regardless of how it factors, or does not factor, into the disappearance of lesbian bars, the narratives invoked in discussions of lesbian bar closures claim that the clash between lesbian spaces (as bigoted) and mixed spaces (as not), a clash within which the latter wins out, can only be a good thing. This is leveraged on the idea of inclusion—as lesbian spaces, here, are generalized as exclusive. However, what populations are excluded—in the sense of having no access to lesbian and queer women spaces—as lesbian bars disappear? What of considerations for the now large swathes of space that do not have a single bar that caters to lesbian and queer women? My Sister’s Room, a bar for lesbian and queer women in Atlanta, Georgia, may be the only bar of its kind in the entire Southeast region.²³⁴ The Midwest has limited queer spaces to begin with, and currently Walker’s Pint, a lesbian bar in Milwaukee, is one of (maybe) two remaining lesbian bars in the entire Midwest region. There are massive regions of the country without a single (or only few) bars for lesbian and queer women, including disadvantaged regions. If this indicates a rise in the en masse inclusion of all queer people, I fail to see it.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Julie Compton, “Few Lesbian Bars Remain in the U.S. Will They Survive COVID-19?,” NBC News, May 1, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/few-lesbian-bars-remain-u-s-will-they-survive-covid-n1196891>.

Suzanna Danuta Walters, sociologist, argues that queer theory “often posits itself as the antidote to a ‘retrograde’ feminist theorizing.”²³⁵ While I would argue that the term queer has significant benefit, I also aim to critically examine the relationship between queer space, lesbian space, queer identity, and lesbian identity. Of course, here Walters is discussing queer *theory*, but one cannot help but to notice the commonalities between queer theory as antidote to retrograde feminism, and characterizations of the loss of supposedly uniformly retrograde lesbian bars to more mixed queer bars as progress. Walters further describes the dynamic between queer theory and feminism, particularly lesbians, lesbian feminists, and lesbian feminism, writing:

The story [...] goes something like this: once upon a time there was this group of really boring ugly women who never had sex, walked a lot in the woods, read bad poetry about goddesses, wore flannel shirts, and hated men (even their gay brothers). They called themselves lesbians. Then, thankfully, along came these guys named Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan dressed in girls' clothes riding some very large white horses. They told these silly women that they were politically correct, frigid, sex-hating prudes who just did not GET IT-it was all a game anyway, all about words and images, all about mimicry and imitation, all a cacophony of signs leading back to nowhere. To have a politics around gender was silly, they were told, because gender was just a performance anyway, a costume one put on and, in drag performance, wore backward. And everyone knew boys were better at dress up.²³⁶

Walters relies this anecdote to illustrate her perception of how postmodern academic circles have pilloried prior lesbians and lesbian feminism “in order to point out how the sex debates, postmodernism, and queer theory have nicely superseded this outmoded, reformist, prudish, banal feminism of old.”²³⁷ She also poses the question, “is

²³⁵ Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can’t a Woman Be More like a Fag?).”

²³⁶ Walters, 844.

²³⁷ Walters, 842.

it possible that queer theory's unspoken Other is feminism, or even lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism?" I argue that Walters' insightful question applies not only to the discursive habits that have surrounded queer theory at times, but also to the framing of queer identity, and queer space, too, as the antidote to lesbian spaces. Discursive strategies that characterize the decline of lesbian bars as a sign of queer progress winning out fail to notice the ways in which, at least partially, it is the flows of capitalism (which still run along white, male, straight, and middle class lines) that win out as bars that were few in numbers to begin with (such as lesbian bars, and queer bars that cater to people of color) decline into minute sums. The remaining 1,000 queer bars that cater to gay men and mixed gender crowds do not, in fact, meet the needs of all queer people. This was the case during the time of *The Country*, when some lesbian and queer women came together to create their own bar out of a need for safety and a space to be themselves (as many interviewees put it), because mixed gender spaces were not meeting their needs, and that remains the case in the present day.

Scholars and activists alike have made statements regarding the closure of lesbian bars, and the implications of that when it comes to categories of lesbian and queer. Kate Bornstein, nonbinary queer activist and author, argues that "[...] old categories don't work, so they [new generations] built new ones. And then another generation is going to come along and those categories aren't going to work for them and they'll build new ones. That's the way of the world. That's just how it happens."²³⁸ Bornstein makes a

²³⁸ Stephanie Fairington, "The Problem with Co-Opting 'Queer,'" CNN, July 4, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/04/opinions/lgbtq-identity-and-risk-of-erasing-history-fairington/index.html>.

great point; however, they do not consider the ways that new generations *also inherit* vocabulary from previous generations and augment its original meaning to suit their purposes, rather than simply abandoning them. Joan Nestle, lesbian activist and founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, states, “I don’t feel abandoned or betrayed by another generation saying that they have to dismantle what seemed to give structure to our dreams, to form their own. That’s not how history works.”²³⁹ Nestle’s statement is not quite as ‘category’ specific as Bornstein’s, but she also speaks to the same idea that lesbian bar closures, and the perception that lesbian conflicts with queer, is simply part of ‘march of progress’ of history. Once again, however, this does not take into account the continuation of terms across generations, and the potential continued utility, even, of words between generations.

The word queer itself is the most obvious example of inheritance. Gregory Coles, scholar of rhetoric, discusses the way the LGBTQ+ community has reclaimed queer, originally a slur, in order to change the nature of discourse. Coles argues that this reclamation was accomplished “by performatively causing it to select and deflect different portions of reality, limiting its ability to function pejoratively.”²⁴⁰ In doing so, Cole continues, this demonstrates a hopeful response to the quandary of linguistic oppression, as minority groups rarely have the ability to eliminate derogatory words from discourse, so the inventive recourse is to take on the derogatory words themselves. The activist group Queer Nation was not the first to reclaim the slur queer, but they were

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Gregory Coles, “The Exorcism of Language: Reclaimed Derogatory Terms and Their Limits,” *College English* 78, no. 5 (2016): 430.

potentially the first to do so so widely. Queer Nation distributed a pamphlet titled “Queers Read This” at the 1990 New York City Gay Pride Parade. They were also the group to coin the famous slogan “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.”²⁴¹ In the years following, others reclaimed the word, enough that, according to Cole, “the discourse of homosexual difference” was transformed from “a site of disdain to a site of honor.”²⁴² Lesbian is not a slur the way queer used to wholly be, but it can be used as an insult, the way that queer can still be used as an insult now.

Christina Cauterucci, staff writer for *Slate*, speaks to this, writing, “Some years ago, a close friend and I developed a not-so-subtle code for queer women too basic for our tastes: We’d make an “L” with our thumbs and forefingers against our foreheads, like the loser sign that was popular when we were in middle school. In this case, the “L” stood for lesbian.”²⁴³ Cauterucci meditates on this, after admitting that she is duly shamed by this memory, adding that she and her friend saw a vast political difference between ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer.’ There was also too, Cauterucci adds, an element of disdain, one that echoes Freeman’s concept of temporal drag, and Walters’ argument that queer is posited as the antidote to lesbianism. “Some of our resistance to the term lesbian arose, no doubt, from internalized homophobic notions of lesbians as unfashionable, uncultured homebodies. We were convinced that our cool clothes and enlightened, radical paradigm

²⁴¹ Coles, 433.

²⁴² Coles, 434.

²⁴³ Christina Cauterucci, “For Many Young Queer Women, Lesbian Offers a Fraught Inheritance,” <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/12/young-queer-women-dont-like-lesbian-as-a-name-heres-why.html>, *Slate*, December 20, 2016.

made us something other than lesbians, a label chosen by progenitors who lived in a simpler time with stricter gender boundaries.”²⁴⁴

Cauterucci goes on to argue that while lesbian no longer explains our collective identity anymore (though I’m not sure that it ever did, even previously), that there is the potential for reinvention. Cauterucci invokes the example of tea dances, which used to refer to upper middle class afternoon tea gatherings that took place in gardens and the like during the early 20th century. It was illegal for bars in New York to sell alcohol to people known to be gay during the mid-1960s, so gay men began to host their own ‘tea dances’ outside of the city on Sunday afternoons. After some decades, tea dances have been become a part of gay club nightlife. Cauterucci proposes that, like tea dances, perhaps lesbian can also transform. “If queers can transform a formal social gathering for biscuit-nibbling heterosexuals into a mainstay of the gay party circuit, imagine what we could do with lesbian.”²⁴⁵ Unlike previous individuals I have quoted, Cauterucci does not assume that lesbian has nothing to offer queer, which appears to be the assumption that others (such as Bornstein) build upon. Users on Tumblr (which, as discussed previously, skew young and queer) have creatively combined lesbian with nonbinary, demonstrating that, clearly for some, lesbian *does* have something to offer more expansive, and even queer identities such as nonbinary.

Findings and Limitations

I consider the key findings of this dissertation to be: 1) a demonstration of the continued import of safety, authenticity, and desire for some lesbian communities, even

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

in wildly different lesbian spaces (material versus digital) 2) an examination of the evolution of lesbian identity and a reorientation of ‘lesbian’ away from sex and toward desire and experiential alignment, within a digital microcosm (Tumblr) that encourages hyper-specific, proliferating post-identities, 3) evidence of a possible union of lesbian and queer concepts for the purposes of self-expression and community building, and 4) the continued relevance of sexual orientation categories in self-concept in queer times. In addition, this is potentially the first academic work, or at least among the first, to examine nonbinary lesbian identity. I consider this work a contribution to sexuality studies, queer studies, and lesbian studies. Lesbian studies as a field is sometimes considered academically passé, with queer studies having superceded gay and lesbian studies in prominence, but my findings regarding nonbinary lesbian identity and community building present fresh ground to explore relevant to the strategic specificity of lesbian, and the evolution of the concept.

I consider the limitations of this dissertation to pertain mostly to methods and data collection. While the mass of Tumblr posts I gathered were very informative, they were also somewhat unwieldy. A more limited, intimate ethnography, such as focusing on a set of specific nonbinary lesbian blogs and users, would be an apt approach to further scholarship on this subject. Furthermore, while computer-mediated discourse analysis is entirely appropriate, I argue, for attending to Tumblr posts, which are frequently a textual medium, I think future research on nonbinary lesbian identity must include voices of nonbinary lesbians in the form of interviews, much like what was done with the women who frequented The Country. Additionally, Tumblr has a unique architecture as a digital platform, one that relies on uncontrolled, user-determined vocabularies to ‘tag’ posts. As

this tagging is uncontrolled, meaning users can enter any words they'd like, even entire original sentences, as a tag, that means that the contents of a posts tag can contain further discourse relevant to analysis. It is not uncommon for Tumblr users to express themselves not only in the body of the post, but also in the tags. Some users, not infrequently, place *more* emotional expression within the tags. My research considered only one tag (that of nonbinary lesbian) and focused on the post body, rather than the tag, portion of posts. The tags on these posts may very well elucidate further information regarding nonbinary lesbian and queer identities, and thus deserve examination.

The Future of Lesbian

At the 2015 NWSA, in which I attended the “Lesbian in Queer Times” panel, the broader theme of the conference that year was the notion of precarity— the precarious conditions of a violent world, and the precarious communities that struggle within those intricate systemic inequalities.²⁴⁶ The panel, relating itself directly to the conference theme, discussed the precarity of lesbian studies and lesbian as a concept. They debated the utility of ‘lesbian’ as a historical category of study, and discussed how (and if) lesbian studies could continue to make unique contributions to sexuality scholarship. Meanwhile, in the years directly following 2015, nonbinary lesbian identity accretes in online spaces such as Tumblr. For some of these individuals, no doubt, nonbinary lesbian is bedrock to their self-conception.

²⁴⁶ NWSA, “NWSA, A History 2015 – 36th National Conference,” NWSA National Women’s Studies Association, June 12, 2020, <https://www.nwsa.org/news/512470/NWSA-A-History-2015--36th-National-Conference.htm>.

A 2018 Pink News feature by Amy Ashenden interviews nonbinary lesbians in order to understand how and why these individuals have combined seemingly contradictory terms.²⁴⁷ Ashenden acknowledges that the established definition of lesbian is understood to indicate women who are attracted to women. Several of the discursive strategies used in the nonbinary Tumblr posts to legitimate nonbinary lesbian identity are also relied on in Amy Ashenden's interview clips with nonbinary lesbians. This includes the notion of 'my gender is lesbian' and notions of alignment with women and/or womanhood. One interviewee, H, describes how they arrived as a nonbinary lesbian identity this way:

I know I haven't had a binary experience of gender in the ways my peers have. My experience of gender is both woman and agender, I feel both of those things, so I have an experience of gender which is aligned to womanhood and I'm attracted to women, so therefore that's a lesbian experience.²⁴⁸

This echoes a great deal of the content from #nonbinary lesbian, emphasizing desire for women as the key to a nonbinary lesbian identity. Another interviewee, Ash, also emphasizes *lesbian* experience of the world, and the category of lesbian itself, as more primary than the category of 'woman' alone. Ash explains, "As a lesbian you defy probably one of the biggest gender roles that exists, which is for your life to revolve around a man, so that links into how being non-binary also doesn't conform to expectations of gender."²⁴⁹ This parallels Monique Wittig's famous statement "Lesbians are not women."²⁵⁰ Wittig built this declaration overtop a broader argument that

²⁴⁷ Amy Ashenden, "Can You Be Both Non-Binary and Lesbian?," Pink News, August 13, 2018, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/08/13/can-you-be-both-non-binary-and-lesbian/>.

²⁴⁸ Ashenden.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Jacob Hale, "Are Lesbians Women?," *Hypatia* 11, no. 2 (1996): 94–121.

“woman” is a social relation to man that is defined by heterosexuality thus, therefore, lesbians are not women. Some scholars, such as Jacob Hale, philosopher, have argued that Wittig’s statement is problematic.²⁵¹ Hale specifically argues that while Wittig’s emphasis on ‘woman’ as a category produced through heterosexuality is useful for feminist studies, that Wittig’s view of lesbians as not women is also so limited that it excludes additional defining characteristics of the composition of the category of woman. The reasoning of lesbians as not-women is very much embraced within nonbinary lesbian discourse on Tumblr, and other internet sources.

Sasha Carney, a contributor for Yale’s feminist publication *Broad Recognition*, wrote a defense of nonbinary lesbian identity during 2019.²⁵² In this defense, Carney discusses the comments on the same *Pink News* feature discussed. These comments largely, Carney notes, are quite critical, including remarks that “words have no meaning to these people” and “we might as well leave the Amazon burning if this is the world we’re trying to save.”²⁵³ Carney summarized the argument ‘against’ nonbinary lesbian identity, understandably citing the notion that the categories of nonbinary and woman are incontrovertibly oppositional. However, Carney disagrees with this, writing that some view nonbinary as a ‘third gender’, which replaces our rigid gender binary with an equally rigid gender trinary. “The truth is that ‘non-binary’ is more of a linguistic shorthand,” Carney writes, “for a range of gender identities that are, quite literally, Not Binary.”²⁵⁴ Carney goes on to cite Chandra Mohanty’s argument against the assumption that women constitute a coherent group, and that womanhood is formed by social and political conditions. Carney also cites author, communist, and activist Leslie Feinberg as an instance of lesbian gender non-conformity, pointing out that Feinberg identified as both a butch lesbian and not a woman, or a man for that matter, simultaneously.

²⁵¹ Hale.

²⁵² Sasha Carney, “In Defense of Non-Binary Lesbianism,” *Broad Recognition*, November 4, 2019, <http://www.broadsatyale.com/in-defense-of-non-binary-lesbianism/>.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Considering queer's (as an identity, and as a political concept) embracing of ambiguous boundaries, or lack thereof, it is interesting that same creative ingenuity cannot be lent to lesbian (as an identity, and as a political concept). In a 2014 interview, Butler was asked if she feels some people misrepresent her theories regarding social construction. Butler explains that she knows "some people believe I see gender as a 'choice' rather than as an essential and firmly fixed sense of self" and disavows that reading of her work, stating unmistakably that her "view is actually not that."²⁵⁵ Butler elaborates on what is 'most important' regarding gender, saying:

No matter whether one feels one's gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives. So whether one wants to be free to live out a "hard-wired" sense of sex or a more fluid sense of gender, is less important than the right to be free to live it out, **without** discrimination, harassment, injury, pathologization or criminalization – and **with** full institutional and community support. That is most important in my view.²⁵⁶

Butler acknowledges that some individuals feel their gendered and sexed realities are fixed, and others have a more fluid sense of their gendered being. Regardless of that, Butler concludes that individuals should have the right to be free to live that out. Butler accepts that some individuals may experience their sexed life in a more fixed way, others simply do not. Nonbinary lesbians, appropriately, exist somewhere in the middle. The nonbinary aspect of this gender identity relates to a less fixed notion of gender and sex, at least, certainly not one connected with the gender binary. However, the lesbian aspect does lend fixedness. This fixed quality does not necessarily relate to sex, but it does relate to fixed love for and alignment with women. The term lesbian, for nonbinary lesbians, acts as desire coordinates to a latitude of desire for women, and a longitude of broader,

²⁵⁵ Judith Butler, Judith Butler addresses TERFs and the work of Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond, interview by Cristan Williams, May 1, 2014, <http://theterfs.com/2014/05/01/judith-butler-addresses-terfs-and-the-work-of-sheila-jeffreys-and-janice-raymond/>.

²⁵⁶ Butler.

existential alignment with women. The lesbian endures during queer times, as individuals continue to need lesbian specificity to express their experiences and desires.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. FIGURES

Figure 1: non-aligned-sapphic. “A Simple Idea for the Orbisian Flag.” Nblw & Awesome (blog), October 10, 2017. <https://non-aligned-sapphic.tumblr.com/post/166265392726/orbisian-flag-idea-purples-and-yellows>

Figure 2: memedocumentation. “Meme Documentation.” Tumblr. *Meme Documentation* (blog). Accessed September 6, 2021. <https://memedocumentation.tumblr.com/post/136140338855/ladygolem-dreadcrow-64bitwar-declaring>.

Figure 3: to-teen-girl, “Dear female aligned enbies,” February 7, 2020. <https://to-teen-girl.tumblr.com/post/190697453629/dear-female-aligned-enbies-youre-as-much-a-girl>

Figure 4: lovelyqueers, “Moodboard of a non-binary lesbian,” September 11, 2018. <https://lovelyqueers.tumblr.com/post/179932954623/moodboard-of-a-non-binary-lesbian>

Figure 5: yourfaveisalesbian, “the sculptor, galatea, from identity v is a nonbinary lesbian,” September 11, 2018. <https://lovelyqueers.tumblr.com/post/179932954623/moodboard-of-a-non-binary-lesbian>

Figure 6: mireland-isnt-allocishet, “My nonbinary ace lesbian flag (click for better quality) ^^” September 28, 2020. <https://mireland-isnt-allocishet.tumblr.com/post/630525264064118784/nonbinary-ace-lesbian-flag-by-me-free-to-use>

APPENDIX 2. ORAL HISTORIES REPOSITORY LETTER

**FAULKNER
MORGAN
ARCHIVE**

2650 Bowman Mill Road
Lexington, KY 40513
faulknermorgan.org
859-321-4728

Jonathan Coleman, Ph.D.
President

Robert Morgan
Vice-president

Emily Reeves
Secretary/Treasurer

Paul Michael Brown Vanessa
Holden, Ph.D.
Silas House
L. Tracee Whitley
Directors

Adriana Sisko
Project Director

Jack Swab
Collections Intern

Caitlyn Rahschulte
Social Media Intern

December 8, 2021

Dear Colleague,

This letter confirms that the interviews conducted for *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar* oral history project are located at the Faulkner Morgan Archive in Lexington, Kentucky. The recordings are accessible to the public upon request. This letter also confirms that Adriana Sisko, as project director of *The Country: Remembering Lexington's First Lesbian Bar*, has full permission to quote from or publish recordings from the collection in their research. This permission is granted by the Faulkner Morgan Archive and by the interviewees, who all signed a Deed of Gift Agreement relinquishing legal title and literary property rights to the recordings.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 859-321-4728 or info@faulknermorgan.org

With regards,



Jonathan Coleman, Ph.D.
Co-Founder
Faulkner Morgan Archive, Inc.

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