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Queer Theory

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The Lesbian Role

I decided to look at the emergence of the homosexual role as postulated by such authors as Mary Macintosh, Michel Foucault and John D'Emilio and see how this concept applies to the emergence of lesbian identity. I will also look at other works such as Martha Vicinus' "They wonder to which sex I belong": The Historical Roots of Modern Lesbian Identity.'

Mary McIntosh, in her article "The Homosexual Role" looks at the concept of Homosexuality as a social construction. Written in 1968, Macintosh's article was revolutionary. She postulated the idea that homosexuality isn't a condition and should be instead be understood to be a social role.

Michele Foucault looked at homosexuality as a construction as well, one that emerged during the "repressed" sexuality of the Victorian age. Foucault challenges the idea that the Victorians were repressed sexually, citing the 'other Victorians' who were not repressed such as pimps and prostitutes. More notably, however seemed to be the psychiatrists and doctors who seemed obsessed with cataloging and explaining sexual behaviors. Sex discourse became a part of a psuedo-scientific regulation that put things in categories of normal or perverse sexual practices. The emphasis on psychological deviance created a way to persecute deviants of 'normal' sexual practices.

D'Emilio argues that this emergence of identifying as a homosexual was the direct result of capitalism and the industrial revolution. As industry moved outside of extended family units men could congregate outside the home and practice their same sex desires in a more organized way,. This, he said, led to a specific type of of deviant that allowed people to call themselves gay in large groups and then organize politically. What can we say then of lesbian culture? Lesbian woman don't seem to have emerged in this same way as gay men.

Homosexuality as a condition of identity only emerged in recent history (between 150 and 300 years ago depending on your source). The Kinsey Reports show that behaviors of those labeled homosexual and heterosexual go outside the prescriptions of each group and crosses over boundaries. Much of behavior associated with homosexuals has nothing to do with whether or not they sleep with other men. The affects they are given, such as gay men having limp wrists and a lisp, probably come from the molly houses and gay bars of the early twentieth century as a way to identify a man who wanted to sleep with men and was therefore available.

According to Macintosh, Scientists have had a hard time finding a clear definition of homosexual, even resorting to creating a third category of bisexual when the person doesn't completely fit the homosexual mold. This has led to discussion of differing types of homosexuals, real homosexuals, bisexuals and psuedo-homosexuals. The scientific community attempted to find the etiology of homosexuals and were unable to do so, not because they didn't try hard enough, but because they looked at the wrong things.

To see that homosexuality is a role and not a condition we need only look at the fact that the role of homosexual brings with it certain expectations about other behaviors that are not directly a consequence of sleeping with a person of the same sex. Homosexual men are thought to be effeminate, while homosexual woman are thought to be mannish. If we look at novels like The Well of Loneliness, we see the main character is more obviously transgendered but the novel is classified (even says it on the cover) as a lesbian novel. We are all familiar with with conflation of gender expression and homosexual identity, though we can think of plenty of examples of people with normative gender expression but same sex desires or self-labels.

Macintosh believed that one thing that should be studied is the concept of homosexuality itself as a condition and it's affect on those so labeled. Labeling people in this manner is a method of control. One way this controls people is by have clearly identified the line between behavior that is acceptable and that which is unacceptable. Any specific behavior seen as indicative of homosexual behavior in a

person will bring up the question of whether that person is indeed a homosexual in total. Once labeled then the person is suddenly in the deviant category. This marginalization is a move to keep most of society pure and free of those on the outside. For the marginalized the label can become an excuse to continue in their deviance. This also tends to make the role of homosexual a distinct category as people begin to adopt the identity as 'other' than the heterosexual role.

Even today a woman with short hair is often recognizable as a lesbian whether or not she does it to look like a man. For she often does it to look like a lesbian. If labeling someone is a way to control and marginalize someone, why would a woman choose the identity of a lesbian? According to Macintosh the role allows one to practice the deviant practices while maintaining that they are just doing what they have been labeled to do. As any good neuroscience text will tell you, people like to understand themselves as consistent beings, despite the vast evidence against such a concept. People want to believe that 'they are who they say they are' to other people and to themselves.

Once a person has accepted the role of the homosexual it is only natural that that person will take on other recognizable traits to fully try and integrate into that new role. This process can be painful and traumatizing, but it is often necessary to what is conceived about the role itself. The trope of the coming out story makes it so that changing your appearance is part of the process.

That homosexuality is a construct seems to be understood by most people. We can have someone who has never slept with the same sex, never slept with anyone, claiming to be gay or lesbian. Even as we understand that our sexual identity is in a sense, made up, we also see the idea of biological determinism at play in the media and discourse on the subject. While it seems we understand homosexuality as a role, we want to see it as biologically determined. This want has a lot to do with governmental politics around the subject and people wanting rights in society. It is easier to get rights as a minority group of people who cannot help being what they are, such as being born into a minority race, than by choice of sexual partner. If homosexuality is seen as merely a choice, the chance at getting rights seem lessened. Macintosh believes that homosexually labeled persons accept, even

embrace, the idea that homosexuality is a condition. It makes it easier to practice the role they are in and also helps prevent deviance outside of the role.

Martha Vicinus looked at the emergence of lesbian identity in her piece "They wonder to which sex I belong": The Historical Roots of Modern Lesbian Identity.' She notes that there are four main ways in which same sex desire presented itself historically in woman. The first way was in the guise of the transvestite. Woman dressed as men for all sorts of reasons, the most common reasons being to gain a better job or to join the military. Vicinus notes that this often led her contemporaries to rework the idea of cross dressing into more acceptable terms. For instance, in many ballads about these 'warrior women' the woman who joined the army was following her beloved into war. Other famous cross dressers were those of the stage. However both of these examples could get away with saying they dressed that way for specific reasons. It was when a woman dressed mannishly without the reason of war or theatrics that caused trouble. One theory is that society could not conceive of a woman marrying a woman so then one of them became the man so they could marry. In this case then the one had to continue to try passing as a man. Another type of lesbian was that of the sexually free woman who would sleep with women or men. This type is almost always associated with political scandals and intrigue. The fourth type of lesbian behavior was the romantic friendship. These intense relationships of declared passion seemed not to center on outward appearance and there is no admittance of sexual acts. Lesbian acts of this type seemed to be hidden unless a woman tried to step on a mans territory.

With all of these types of women who love women it is a wonder at all that we have a label for lesbians at all. Then again we often try to lump all woman into one category even though the woman have differing standpoints and oppressions within society. Just as feminism is split into differing opinions so to then are lesbians.

Lesbian identity was slower in gaining autonomy and more hidden in culture. This may have something to do with women's dependence on men economically and in traditional family structures

where the woman's place was in the home. Even during the industrialization of work and more woman working outside the home, it was still hard for a woman to gain independence from familial obligation. In fact, one of the consequences of the industrial revolution was the move from extended family units—including multiple generations of family as well as siblings and cousins living under one roof—to the nuclear family where only a wife and husband and children shared a residence. This had the affect of making the man more autonomous, but leaving the woman at home with the task of taking care of house and children. This setup made it easy for a man to express same sex desires, but less freedom for a woman to do the same. While there were definitely the beginnings of a lesbian movement in the 1920's and 30's, it hasn't been until recently, with the women's liberation movement of the 1960's, that woman have been able to have the autonomy to form a more open public identity. This lag in autonomy has also had the effect that identification as a lesbian has been less cohesive and less able to be labeled as it hasn't had such a strong historical pigeonhole.

We can say then that categories of sexuality and gender roles are more culturally specific rather than culturally pervasive. What makes one fit into the categories is also specific to each culture, the same acts and practices in one culture may not get a person the same label in another culture. This also means that not everyone fits into the category of homosexual equally, and that our insistence that sexual identity “means something” creates conflict and discrepancies within a person and within culture at large. Our labels are inadequate to account for the full sexual spectrum of peoples desires and practices. These labels have the affect of boxing in some and excluding others.

Lesbian identity while slow to be realized has become recognized by society at large. Still this identity is incomplete and in many ways contradictory within the category. While we can understand that this identity is socially constructed it is still a legitimate role that people choose to play.