

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jennifer Marie Almquist for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in Women Studies, Women Studies, and Sociology presented on April 20, 2004.

Title: Incredible Lives: An Ethnography of Southern Oregon Womyn's Lands.

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Abstract approved _____

Susan M. Shaw

This research summarizes the cumulative efforts of in-depth research, extensive participant observation, and archival analysis focused on Southern Oregon lesbian lands. This community of womyn has persisted in rural Southern Oregon for nearly 30 years. The intention of this study is to examine both the accumulation of knowledge of issues pertaining to the maintenance of "womyn-centered" spaces as well as the future of both the lands and the visions they embody.

While most participants believe in the importance of perpetuating the vision of lesbian lands, they are experiencing difficulties in finding new residents. As womyn on rural lands in Southern Oregon discuss the success and challenges, the value of ensuring the future becomes evident. Documenting these rich experiences provides a foundation for womyn seeking alternatives to patriarchy. Thus, womyn on land are interested in sharing their vision with future generations of womyn.

Potential for future research includes an exploration of the attitudes among young lesbians, specifically in regards to the presence of a desire to live in community with other womyn closely connected to the earth's natural processes.

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Incredible Lives: An Ethnography of Southern Oregon Womyn's Lands

by
Jennifer Marie Almquist

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented April 20, 2004
Commencement June 2004

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies thesis of Jennifer Marie Almquist presented on April 20, 2004.

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Jennifer Marie Almquist, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses the deepest appreciation to a family that has believed in her process of growing wings and taking flight—the family of origin whose unconditional love and support has opened a world of possibilities, and the chosen family whose patience and devotion is a constant source of joy.

Many thanks specifically to Mom and Dad for checking the oil in my car before long drives to Southern Oregon and for checking for commas before I submitted my final draft. To Sophie and Bella who warmed my feet and offered encouragement during long hours in front of the computer. Finally, to Lisa and Amy who make me laugh and let me cry—without their affection, this thesis would not be.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
THE TOPIC	1
THE QUESTIONS	2
THE RESEARCHER	4
THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	6
LITERATURE REVIEW	8
BACKGROUND	8
ROOTS OF LESBIAN FEMINISM	9
The Emergence of Radical Feminism	10
Making the Connection	11
The Emergence of Lesbian-Feminism	11
STRUGGLES AROUND LESBIAN FEMINISM	13
Critiques of the Womyn's Movement	13
Critiques of a Lesbian Movement	14
DEFINING "LESBIAN"	15
Not Without Struggle	17
Strictly Lesbian	18
LESBIAN SEPARATISM	19
Separatism in General	19
Feminist Separation	20
Lesbian Separatism	21
Defining Separatism	22
Why separatism is necessary	23
Challenges	24
SOUTHERN OREGON COMMUNITIES	25

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
CONCLUSIONS.....	26
METHODOLOGY.....	28
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	28
METHODS	29
Feminist Ethnography	29
Multi-Sited Ethnography.....	30
Interview Format.....	32
Participant Observation.....	33
Data Analysis	34
PARTICIPANTS	35
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	38
IT IS OUR HERSTORY	39
The discovery of rural land in Southern Oregon.....	39
Acquiring land.....	40
CHALLENGES	42
Sustaining energy.....	42
Perpetuating Patriarchy	43
WHAT WOMYN DO WHEN THERE ARE NO MEN DOING IT.....	45
Patriarchy	46
Separatism.....	47
Literal Spaces	49
Creating Community.....	51
Figurative Space.....	53
Who are the womyn	55
LIVING ON THE LAP OF THE MOTHER	57
Lesbian land and the politics of place.....	57
Connections with nature.....	58
Lessons from the land	59

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
LESBIAN LAND FOREVER	63
Aging.....	63
Land Trusts	64
Re-visioning	65
Villages	66
Womyn Finding Their Way	68
What is happening "out there"	69
Someone else's vision	70
Re-inventing the wheel	70
Integration.....	72
CONCLUSIONS.....	74
CONTINUING THE DISUCSSION	74
WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BE?	75
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	76
LAST WORDS	76
BIBLIOGRAPHY	77

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the womyn who hold the space...

Incredible lives
Transparent blood on the panels of wood
Of the womyn-crafted homes
That look out on the forest
Of solemn trees
Land rich, but money poor
Revolutionary lives
The sweat soaked gardens
Flowers bloom from the labour of love
Abundant waters, giving life
For the food on the table
Living on the lap of the mother
Evolutionary lives
Voices raised in harmony
To expansive night skies
And love sparked fires
In the cycle of life, death
And rebirth
I affect the land and the land affects me
Seasoned lives
In the pain that is loss
And the joy that is abundance
Of tired bodies on gracious earth
Giving back
What was never ours to begin with
How can this not change you

INCREDIBLE LIVES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SOUTHERN OREGON WOMYN'S LANDS

INTRODUCTION

THE TOPIC

Unbeknownst to many visitors, and even residents, of Southern Oregon, the Interstate-5 corridor between Roseburg to Ashland is populated by a number of landdykes—lesbian-identified womyn¹ focused on creating womyn-identified communities. Womyn began moving to Southern Oregon in 1972 in search of space to create womyn-centered culture separate from cities infused with patriarchy (Corinne, 2002a, p. 6). Oregon land was inexpensive in the 1970s, low cost construction methods were readily available, imagination and tenacity were abundant, and the womyn had a vision; thus lesbian land communities began to form nestled into the hills along I-5.

Spurred in part by lesbian-feminism, activist womyn of the 1970s envisioned womyn-only spaces as alternatives to the sexist “psychic contamination” of spaces defined within patriarchy (Faderman, 1991, p. 238). While some formed womyn-only working and living collectives in cities across the nation, many other womyn found the “man-made world” of the cities emotionally draining and opted instead for establishing womyn-only spaces in rural areas (Faderman, 1991, p. 238). In *Little Houses on Women's Land*, Tee A. Corrine (2002a) talks about the “dream” of the Southern Oregon lands as rooted in “self-sufficiency and independence, creativity and community support” (p. 7). Though lesbian land communities are not unique to Oregon and the past 30 years have not been entirely free of conflict—the communities

¹ Alternate spellings of words that refer to men were common in cultural feminist writings. The use of “womyn,” “wimmin,” and “womon,” for example, have been used to reconfigure androcentric terminology. The use of “womyn” throughout this paper is a deliberate attempt to write about womyn’s culture using womyn-centered language.

in Southern Oregon *are* distinct. Lillian Faderman (1991) ends her discussion of womyn's lands by noting their demise near the end of the 1970s, yet those on Southern Oregon lands have persisted in a way that serves as a counter-example to what Faderman terms the "death" of the "country communes" (p. 239).

Over the past 30 years, some of the Southern Oregon womyn have endured alone, some in pairs, and others in larger communities—yet they have endured. While some womyn have left womyn's land (with the most dramatic exodus occurring in the early 1980s), over the years new womyn have joined (Corinne, 2002a, p. 6). For the womyn who have remained, the past 30 years have been characterized by womyn-crafted homes, abundant gardens, enduring community, and a way of life that honors both womyn and their surrounding environment (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000, p. 40).

As womyn who have been on Southern Oregon lands for three decades celebrate turning fifty, sixty, and seventy, questions arise about the future of womyn's land. While new womyn are drawn to the land through various means (Corinne, 2002a, p. 8), there does not seem to be the same exodus from urban areas to rural spaces that occurred in the 1970s along with the broader Back to the Land Movement. What then will facilitate a smooth incorporation of new residents? What understanding, vision, and wisdom do the present residents have to offer future residents? In essence, how will the womyn's communities of Southern Oregon endure? Implicit in these questions is the belief that the preservation the Southern Oregon womyn's land communities is an important endeavor and that the maintenance of alternatives to patriarchy remains necessary; thus the impetus for this particular piece of research.

THE QUESTIONS

The inspiration for this research did not supernaturally materialize, nor did I actively seek it out; in all honesty, this topic found me. After reading an article by Catriona Sandilands, published in the Fall 2002 issue of *Women & Environments*

magazines, I was filled with questions about the network of lesbians residing in Southern Oregon. Once I overcame the amazement of discovering that womyn's lands were thriving several hours south of my own home, I sought to clarify questions about how rural lesbians were creating social landscapes that served as alternatives to patriarchy.

Initially, my questions were sparked by Sandilands' (2002) own inquiry into the connections between lesbian identity and ecological thinking (i.e., are there key connections between sexual orientation, separatist politics, and ecological beliefs and practices?). My proposed research thus centered on continuing to explore the possibility of what Sandilands (2002) terms a "lesbian ecological practice" (p. 16). The initial intent of each interview was to delve into how identifying as a lesbian might influence one's relationship with the surrounding natural environment. While some information on this topic did emerge, what I immediately discovered was that my interview participants wanted to create for me a broader understanding of the past 30 years of their lives.

Certainly, ethnographic research that would provide a glimpse of the day-to-day lives, as well as 30 years of success and challenges of womyn's communities, is important. A wealth of questions arise about how the communities have persisted, how they operate on a daily basis, and what sorts of knowledge they have acquired. While my research touches on such questions, I learned upon my first visit to Southern Oregon that the most pressing questions for many of the womyn have to do with the future of their lands and the perpetuity of their visions of womyn-centered spaces. The history, particularly the early history, of the Southern Oregon womyn's lands has been well documented and carefully archived in a special collection at the University of Oregon. However, in my explorations of this collection, I did not find specific discussions of the future of the lands beyond mention that such concerted efforts might be necessary (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000; Sprecher, 1997).

Admittedly, I cannot take credit for generating the question as to the future of womyn's land. Eminently wise, Southern Oregon womyn have thought about the future of at least their own lands, if not their entire community. I simply happened to

arrive in the womyn's community at a critical juncture, and have been able to identify an important starting point for research and discussion.

I entered into this research with the assumption that asking questions about the future of womyn's lands would reveal important information. Specifically, this research seeks to identify ways and means of perpetuating the knowledge gained over the past 30 years so that, as one interview participant states, "womyn [of future generations] do not have to reinvent the wheel." This question in part explores knowledge about the challenges of living on rural land and creating womyn's space. Additionally, remnants of my original line of inquiry remain, for implicit to this question is also a desire to understand the complex relationship womyn have formed with their land. From this stems questions about whom, if anyone, will be called to inherit the lands and to perpetuate thriving southern Oregon womyn's communities. The overarching question motivating this research at first seems impossible i.e., in a sense to predict the future. Yet the reality of exploring the future of womyn's land is that asking such a seemingly impossible question helps visions come to fruition by engaging in focused discussions about the importance of maintaining those visions of womyn's space.

THE RESEARCHER

From early curiosity all the way to writing the final report, the researcher's personal biography is the lens through which [s]he sees the world. Gender, race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, politics, and beliefs all affect the qualitative project (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 9).

Many researchers argue for the maintenance of a value neutral position, insisting that research be conducted apart from the influence of the researcher's own view in order to maintain academic validity (Berg, 2004, p. 155). Furthermore, Daphne Patai cautions against what she terms "nouveau solipsism," or such a portion of preliminary self-reflexivity taken to the point of lengthy autobiography (in Lofland

& Lofland, 1995, p. 14). Nevertheless, I believe the researcher's statement to be a necessary piece of the introduction to this project.

As Rossman and Rallis (1998) suggest, my personal biography pervades this research and it is also what made this study possible. Most notably, access to womyn's lands is afforded to womyn, thus my gender and my sex² became central in my ability to enter womyn's lands, homes and other community gatherings. In the context of the Southern Oregon communities, the use of "woman" is quite often synonymous with "lesbian"³ and while heterosexual womyn are welcomed into many of the spaces, the community is distinctly lesbian-identified. Thus, as a womyn-identified womyn, I share additional points of connection into the community.

Yet, throughout my lifetime I have had little contact with rural ways of life in general. In a set of reflexive field notes dated 21 February 2003, I recorded my sense of accomplishment at having started my first fire in a woodstove (after several attempts). In another set of field notes dated 04 July 2003, I was ecstatic at having set up a tent, though in 05 July's field notes I found myself writing about what it felt like to wake up in a puddle of water having failed to sufficiently insulate myself from the ground. Clearly, certain aspects of my identity afforded me access and some sense of rapport with the womyn of Southern Oregon; other aspects, such as my entire lack of experience with rural ways of life, made me somewhat a stranger.

Along with these aspects of my own identity comes an additional set of biases. However, I came to this study with the belief that my personal biases do not negate the value of my research, for in fact all research is somewhat biased. As a womyn-identified womyn, I have a personal interest in both the construction and preservation of womyn-centered spaces. My feminist perspective includes the belief that patriarchal structures continue to be oppressive to womyn on a variety of levels. While I would not consider myself a separatist in the strictest sense, I agree with Marilyn Frye's (1988) assertion that all feminists engage in some degree of separation

² I make this distinction because as I discuss in the research findings, biological sex remains an important distinction in the construction of womyn-only spaces.

³ In *Setting Up Women's Land in the 1970s: Could We Do it?* Pelican Lee (2003) writes: "Although most of us were lesbians, we called our lands 'women's' lands so as not to exclude coming-out women who didn't yet identify as lesbians" (p. 45).

from sexist individuals and institutions and practice versions of such separation on a regular basis (p. 63).

More specifically, I am influenced by a belief that ecofeminism can play an important role in dismantling patriarchy *and* in creating nurturing relationships between humans and non-human nature. Ecofeminism, the belief that "there are important connections between the domination of women...and the domination of nature," significantly affects the lens through which I have approached this research (Warren, 1996, p. x). My tendency has been to explore connections between living lightly on the earth and the maintenance of womyn-centered space as jointly important in creating alternatives to patriarchal culture. Thus, aspects of my own identity have shaped every stage of this project from initial inquiry through the writing of the final draft.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In the early stages of research design, more experienced researchers suggested I select a topic I enjoyed enough to become immersed in for at least one year. However, I was not prepared for the way this study would wholly consume and alter my entire way of being. My initial inquiry was broad and somewhat abstract; while I realized something important was happening on womyn's lands, I did not comprehend the magnitude to which that was the case. The purpose of this study has become to explore the future implications of separate, rural, womyn-centered "universes" as alternatives to patriarchy.

I have not intended this project to be a comprehensive study of womyn's space, womyn's lands, or even the lands in Southern Oregon. The womyn of Southern Oregon recognize they live incredible lives and have compiled much of their own history, which is archived both in personal collections as well as at the University of Oregon's Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project (SOCLAP). Several books and theses exist that were written by womyn from within and outside of the

communities; I hope to add my own insight as a complementary resource to these collections.

Collecting quantitative and/or qualitative data on all the womyn who have passed through or even who currently live on land would be nearly impossible, or at least beyond the scope and resources available for master's thesis work. What has resulted then, is the insight from an eclectic (yet meaningful), relatively small sample of womyn. Certainly, pieces of the story will be left out and even those voices that are included are pulled from limited interviews and over a year's worth of participant observations. My purpose is to focus on what will be an ongoing discussion of the future of womyn's lands in a specific time and space.

In retrospect, I believe I have done this study with an understanding that the creation of womyn's space has been important and the preservation of womyn's space will continue to be important. It has become important to me personally at the same time that I have come to recognize far-reaching implications. Thus, I mean this research to be somewhat of a nearly 30-year milestone as well as a bridge to 30 more years and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

BACKGROUND

Many look upon the 1960s and 1970s as periods in America's history characterized by revolution with changes emerging in attitudes towards sexuality, pacifism, and even music. The late 1960s also became a pivotal period for the gay liberation movement with June 28, 1969 often identified as a turning point--the night The Stonewall, a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village, was raided by police resulting in riots (Faderman, 1991). While the lesbian presence at the Stonewall riots was minimal, energy was building across the country as various factions of sexual minorities came to see the significance of a call to work actively on homosexual rights issues (Faderman, 1991, p. 195).

Also during this period, feminism began a revolution of its own. A new generation of womyn, claiming the benefits of their foremothers' fight for suffrage, emerged with political savvy and energy to organize. "Consciousness raising" became the term ascribed to the phenomenon of womyn at kitchen tables, in coffee shops, and in bookstores gathering to talk about lived experiences. These conversations often led to collective realizations about the common themes spanning the lives of womyn. In retrospect, feminists term this period the second wave and view it as a time of raised consciousness and radical political activism.

While gay liberation and second wave feminism were born as separate movements, they came together in a way that revolutionized the understanding of womyn-identified culture. Not only were womyn identifying society's perception of the female sex as problematic, they began to realize that the womyn-identified politics of lesbianism were central to a solution. Not always a harmonious union, womyn on all sides felt frustrated by the politics of lesbian-feminism and lesbian separatism. Likewise, womyn *within* the movement have struggled to create a unified identity. Yet, despite the struggles and conflicts often associated with the movement, the result

has greatly influenced both feminist and gay theories and politics--all of which started as the two movements came together to inspire lesbian-feminism.

ROOTS OF LESBIAN FEMINISM

Love between womyn was not a concept unique to lesbian-feminist movement. Romantic friendships and devoted companionship between womyn has a rich and fascinating, but often overlooked, history. While the purpose of this particular inquiry is *not* to detail the history of lesbian relationships, lesbian-feminism must be contextualized in some historical sense of same-sex female relationships in order to be understood.

In her historical account of lesbian life, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Lillian Faderman (1991) explores the evolution from womyn's romantic friendships to lesbian-feminist political organizing. Prior to a period of overt political organizing by lesbians, same-sex relationships were significantly hindered by an economic depression, the elevation of the nuclear family, and the political persecution of the McCarthy-era, just to name a few of the limitations (Faderman, 1991, p. 189). Homosexual men and womyn continued to lead a politically quiet existence right up until the Stonewall Rebellion propelled the gay liberation movement into the political arena. Identified by Faderman (1991) as "the first gay riots in history," the Stonewall Rebellion served as a call for a unified political vision of gay liberation (p. 195). As young, college-educated homosexuals emerged to take part in political movement so emerged the sentiment that the quiet organizing of previous generations was no longer sufficient. The young lesbians of this immediate post-Stonewall period were equipped with education, political awareness, the language and skills to organize, and they were prepared to pursue basic human rights. Yet these young activist womyn discovered their ideals were not represented by any existing political organizations (Faderman, 1991, p. 197).

The Emergence of Radical Feminism

Simultaneously, radical movement began to reawaken feminism, which seemingly had faded from the consciousness of the general public in the wake of the 19th Amendment and womyn's agitation for the right to vote. While feminist energy was certainly *not* dormant during this period, radical feminist thought emerged during the 1960s and 1970s with new questions, strategies, and goals.

One prominent issue for radical feminists continues to be the view that strict gender roles hold problematic consequences for womyn. Within marriage, for example, womyn are vulnerable; even as marrying for love became more common womyn still found themselves bound by a restrictive economic contract. While love may blur the harsh realities of marriage, a wife's duties to her husband still include sexual, psychological, and housekeeping services (Firestone, 1994, p. 253). In *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Shulamith Firestone (1994) makes demands for alternatives to a system based on strict gender division. Firestone (1994) calls womyn to integrate fully into society, explore sexual freedom, and question the limitations of cultural institutions (p. 249). With these demands, she pronounces the institution of family "archaic" (1994, p. 252) and childbearing akin to enslavement (1994, p. 246). Thus in demanding alternatives to systems of strict gender division, radical feminists support self-determination and independence, including economic independence, for womyn (Firestone, 1994, p. 248).

Also important to radical feminist politics is the idea that *all* womyn constitute a class and that this class experiences oppression *as* womyn. The notion that "women *qua* women" are oppressed links womyn via sexual function, an extension of the problematic nature of a strict gender division (Atkinson, 1974, p. 52). Thus, as is characteristic of radical feminism, Atkinson (1974) believes that, "the sex roles—both male and female—must be destroyed, not the individuals who happen to possess either a penis or a vagina, or both, or neither" (p. 55).

Making the Connection

On one hand, womyn who believed they had been born gay were questioning society's attitudes towards homosexuality. Simultaneously, a group of womyn emerged with a consciousness rooted in the notion that ultimately problematic were society's views towards *womyn* (Faderman, 1991, p. 189). One emerging radical feminist group, The Furies, identified that "sexism is the root of all other oppressions" and that womyn must band together to affect change, an idea central to radical feminism (Berson, 1988, p. 26).

While lesbians were involved in a movement de-stigmatizing same-sex love, they were finding coalitions with gay men to be problematic and wrought with conservative attitudes towards womyn, despite liberal attitudes towards sexuality (Faderman, 1991, p. 204). At the same time, many feminists were realizing "the instant logic of sex with another womyn as the basic affirmation of a powerful sisterhood" and a blatant challenge to sexism (Abbot & Love, 1972, p. 149). Thus, as Abbot and Love (1972) succinctly note, "feminists arrived at a turning point in the history of women only to find that Lesbians were already there" (p. 136).

The Emergence of Lesbian-Feminism

The connection between lesbianism and feminism had been made before, but with the start of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, those wanting to scare womyn away from the womyn's movement used 'lesbian' with intentional scorn meant to keep womyn in their proper place. Some womyn in the feminist movement began to realize that "lesbianism has been a kind of code word for female resistance" (Atkinson, 1974, p. 131). In this sense, some feminists began to see lesbianism as "the heart of the Women's Liberation Movement" (Shelley, 2000, p. 308) realizing that effective feminist organizing meant a womyn must devote all her energies, including sexual energy, solely to other womyn (Faderman, 1991, p. 202). Writing in 1972,

Charlotte Brunch noted that, "Lesbians must become feminists and fight against woman oppression, just as feminists must become lesbians if they hope to end male supremacy," and so it was during this period that the term "lesbian-feminist" emerged (p. 333).

While radical feminists were discovering that liberation for womyn must include freedom from sex-role stereotypes (Abbot & Love, 1972, p. 149) womyn in same-sex relationships were making the connection "between the elimination of sex roles and the possibility of loving other women" (Koedt, 1973, p. 247). Expanding on her argument that womyn constitute a class, Atkinson (1974) concludes that lesbianism is the choice by one womyn to make a full-time commitment to others of her class (p. 132). Thus, lesbian-feminism was a means by which committed feminists could challenge the sexist ills perpetuated by patriarchy. Rather than challenging society's views towards homosexuality by arguing heterosexuality was set at or prior to birth, lesbian-feminists took the stance that *all* womyn "had the capacity to be lesbians" and that lesbianism was an appropriate response to society's negative view towards womyn (Faderman, 1991, p. 206).

From this emerged the idea that "the lesbian is in revolt" with lesbian-feminist politics as the basis for liberation from institutions defined to be for the benefit of rich, white men. This is revolt, according to Bunch (2000), because a lesbian defines herself in terms of other womyn rather than in relation to a definition constructed by and for the benefit of men (p. 332). The appeal of lesbian-feminism for some womyn, such as Jo Freeman (1975), stems from the idea that an overt commitment to womyn could become a political strategy in direct challenge to traditional institutions (p. 141).

STRUGGLES AROUND LESBIAN FEMINISM

Critiques of the Womyn's Movement

While many womyn connected lesbian identity with feminist revolution as a way to challenge sexism, and ultimately *all* forms of oppression, not all lesbians were committed to gay liberation and/or feminist movements (Faderman, 1991, p. 201). For lesbians committed to radical political change, the Womyn's Liberation movement of the 1970s seemed to lack direction. Among the critiques of Womyn's Liberation is Bunch's (2000) accusation that womyn in the movement fail "to understand the importance of heterosexuality in maintaining male supremacy" (p. 335).

Based on a notion akin to the idea that men are the enemy and that heterosexuality is ultimately harmful to *all* womyn, lesbians struggled to find common ground with straight womyn. This was intensified by those within the Womyn's Liberation Movement who declined to recognize lesbianism as a political issue. Terming the Womyn's Liberation Movement a "straight women's movement," lesbian organizations such as The Furies encouraged lesbians to "form their own movement in order to be taken seriously" (Berson, 1988, p. 26).

The draining of collective strength by womyn whose primary loyalty was to a man was apparent to lesbians who were frustrated with the Womyn's Movement (Shelley, 2000, p. 309). Some womyn came to believe that involvement in heterosexual relationships was not only ineffective for feminist movement, but was essentially sleeping in the "enemy camp" (Faderman, 1991, p. 202). Among the most outspoken critiques were The Furies, who criticized not only the "haphazard" politics of the Womyn's Movement, but also accused straight womyn of having "fallen prey to the very male propaganda they seek to refute" (Berson, 1988, p. 26).

Tied in with such criticism is the notion of the lesbian as a symbol of a self-actualized womyn, even for feminists who have not realized their own lesbianism (Abbot & Love, 1972, p. 154). Yet, it is because many lesbians struggle to exemplify independence from support by a father or a husband that they need to be involved in

some form of struggle for womyn's rights. Where the tension arises is through assertions such as one attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson—"feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice." The idea that lesbianism essentially served as "feminist theory in action" implied straight womyn were not, or could not, be liberated thus alienating lesbians from pre-existing feminist movement (Abbot & Love, 1972, p. 136).

Critiques of a Lesbian Movement

Certainly, the tensions between lesbians and straight womyn were perpetuated on all sides of both movements. Radical feminism is not necessarily inherently linked with a struggle for lesbian rights. As is previously noted, radical feminists insist that sex roles must be completely obliterated. Yet Mary Daly (1973), well-known for her radical feminist scholarship, recognizes that lesbians frequently assume sex roles (by which she means heterosexual roles) within their same-sex relationships (p. 125). For some, the translation of heterosexual relationship roles into a butch/femme dichotomy is liberating in that it serves to *complicate* rather than *replicate* gender roles. Daly (1973), on the other hand, finds such a reproduction of standard sex roles to be "antithetical to radical feminism" and she is not alone in her sentiments (p. 125).

While Daly's critique is primarily directed towards those lesbians she perceives as unwilling to challenge heterosexual roles, other feminists wanted to distance themselves from such politics that they felt alienated a large population of womyn. Writing nearly 30 years after the initial emergence of lesbian-feminism, bell hooks (2000) critiques the movement for its lack of "respect or concern for the vast majority of women" who find exclusive womyn-centered contact to be impractical or inaccessible (p. 28). Equating feminism with a full time commitment to womyn, as lesbian-feminists proposed, served to close off the movement for many womyn—who in turn responded by attacking feminist movement on a whole (hooks, 2000, p. 29). hooks notes that equating feminism with an alternative lifestyle, e.g. the maintenance *solely* of female-centered relationships, specifically alienated working-class and poor

womyn. Thus the critique hooks (2000) offers is that radical feminism, but particularly the association with lesbian-feminism, essentially caters to middle-class, college-educated single womyn and is not practical in terms of creating accessible feminism (p. 29).

Additionally, part of the frustration with radical lesbian movement came from within the greater lesbian community. According to Abbott and Love (1972), there is a distinction between what they term "premovement Lesbians" and lesbians who come to lesbianism via theory. "Premovement Lesbians" are leery of such womyn whom they perceive to be lacking "sexual experience with other women" and "a gay consciousness" (p. 153). In other words, most lesbians find loving womyn to be an intimately personal experience. Thus, they feel distanced from the idea that womyn might seek same-sex partnership as a primarily political experience (Abbot & Love, 1972, p. 154). What Abbott and Love (1972) are countering is the phenomenon that Johnston describes as "lesbian chauvinism." According to Johnston (1973), the term emerged around 1971 "out of the old stereotyped ideas of gay women being either butch or femme in imitation of the heterosexual role dichotomies" (p. 148). Thus, lesbians in some ways felt disenfranchised from the Womyn's Liberation movement in general and coalitions between feminist movement and a struggle for lesbian rights in particular.

DEFINING "LESBIAN"

Highlighting some of the tensions on all sides of lesbian-feminism helps to contextualize the movement by illustrating the sometimes complicated nature of translating theory into practice. To some extent, this issue of the practicality of praxis exists across theories. In particular feminist theories, which are rooted in personal and collective knowledge and experience, face criticism for their impracticality when reapplied back to the practice of everyday movement in the world. Thus while historically situating the emergence of lesbian-feminism is important, this is ultimately

an exploration of lesbian-feminist and lesbian separatist theoretical approaches to dismantling oppressive social institutions, practices, and beliefs.

Arguably, the first logical question to pose to lesbian-feminist theory is "what is a lesbian?" The answer to this seemingly simple question varies (and proves subtly complex). Writing in 1971, the Radicalesbians generated the frequently cited definition that "a lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion" (2000, p. 233). Koedt (1973) aptly explains that the definitions of "lesbian" vary in meaning from the rigid "having sex *exclusively* with women" to a less sex-focused understanding of "a total life commitment to life with a woman" (p. 248).

According to Bunch (2000), because lesbians literally have no need for men, "lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal, and economic basis of male supremacy" (p. 334). In her exploration of womyn-only energy, Dobkin (1988) emphasizes that this allows lesbians to have "less emotional investment in men and their institutions" (p. 287). Daly (1978) identifies a freedom to lesbian relationships. Free from the constraints of socially defined gender roles that serve to create and exaggerate difference, lesbian relationships allow for new understandings of ways to be in relationships (Daly, 1978, p. 382). The very fact that these same-sex relationships bring social disapproval allows womyn to re-imagine ways of relating (Daly, 1978, p. 383).

For some womyn, lesbianism "took on an aura of chic" during a period of reaction to antiquated notions of sexuality and the de-stigmatization of same-sex love (Faderman, 1991, p. 201). As many lesbian-feminists asserted, "'lesbian' meant a choice any female could make." Thus, any womyn could convert from heterosexuality to homosexuality "in the name of women's liberation" (Faderman, 1991, p. 202). Essentially, there is not consensus over whether lesbianism is a sexual preference, a political choice, neither, or both.

In support of the notion that lesbianism exists as an option to any womyn, much of the lesbian-feminist writing produced in the 1970s cites lesbianism as a political choice. Writings by the Radicalesbians (2000) encouraged those who might not be aware of the political implications to view their lesbian identity as a

fundamental resistance to oppressive female role expectations (p. 233). Others, such as *The Furies*, completely removed lesbianism from a matter of sexual preference, instead stating it is a "political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy" (Berson, 1988, p. 26). Bunch (2000) builds on this idea of lesbian relationships as political by highlighting the political nature of heterosexual relationships; relationships between men and womyn involve issues of power and dominance, thus to *not* engage in such relationships is a political act (p. 332-333).

Other lesbian-feminist writing highlights both the personal *and* political nature of lesbian identity. Even Bunch expands on her definition to include the concept that a lesbian is essentially womyn-identified. That is, to be a lesbian is to center one's sense of self on womyn and to turn to womyn for political, emotional, physical, and economic support (Bunch 2000, p. 332). In this context then, the very personal act of sex becomes highly political (Freeman, 1975, p. 137), but being a lesbian also means joining with other womyn in a collective struggle to end oppression (Bunch, 2000, p. 335-336). Thus, Shelley (2000) offers two facets to understanding "'lesbian'—one in terms of her sexual relations, the other in terms of her independence of men" (p. 305).

Not Without Struggle

While it is difficult to fit into one succinct definition, lesbian identity is also characterized by a unique struggle. Shelley is clear that lesbians' independence of men results in strong societal disapproval. The controversy over lesbian sexual relationships may (or may not) cease at the bedroom door. The fact that public displays of lesbian affection bring harsh sanctions has forced many lesbians to attempt to live secretly (Shelley, 2000, p. 306). Even a lesbian who escapes personal oppression by avoiding heterosexual relationships still moves through society as a womyn, or as Bunch (2000) notes, "worse, a visible lesbian" (p. 333). Yet in a

patriarchal society where a “real woman is one who gets fucked by men” a lesbian does not even pass as a “real woman” (Bunch, 2000, p. 332).

Strictly Lesbian

Whether stemming from the internalized pain of being denied the status of “real woman,” or (more likely) from complexities beyond the scope of this paper, the lesbian-feminist critique of heterosexuality is worth noting. While I have already highlighted the conflicts experienced between lesbian-feminists and some heterosexual feminists, it remains important to expand this critique of womyn who participate in heterosexual relationships to a critique of heterosexuality as an institution.

According to Bunch (2000), heterosexuality separates womyn from each other by defining womyn in relation to men, thus forcing womyn to compete against each other (p. 334). Dworkin (1974) explains heterosexuality as “the ritualized behavior built on polar role definition” meaning that the success of heterosexuality stems from the perpetuation of strict, dichotomous gender roles (p. 184). Dworkin (1974) advocates what she terms “androgynous sex”—the abandonment of male and female roles—to which homosexuality at least comes closer than heterosexuality (p. 185). Others have also identified lesbian relationships as an opportunity to come closer to the vision of a “peer relationship” (where gender roles are not used to determine power and privilege) than is possible within heterosexual relationships (Abbot & Love, 1972, p. 152).

That is not to say that same-sex relationships are inherently free from interpersonal conflict. Rather the lesbian-feminist critique identifies the problematic root of heterosexual relationships as heterosexual privilege. Heterosexual privilege involves access to political, economic, and social security, albeit a sense of security lesbian-feminists critique as false (Bunch, 2000, p. 334).

Perhaps the epitome of balancing heterosexual privilege and social scorn is bisexuality. Again, the subtleties of the bisexual identity (or the traditionally troubled relationship with lesbian politics) are another topic entirely. Suffice it to say that lesbian-feminist politics are weary of heterosexuality and perhaps even to a greater extent, bisexuality. This seems to stem from a deep distrust of womyn who are perceived to seek out the company of womyn on some occasions while still not fully giving up heterosexual privilege (Gutter Dyke Collective, 1988, p. 27).

Ultimately, what arises is a distrust of male-identified institutions. For lesbian-feminists, the way to deconstruct patriarchy is to cease to engage with the system on every level. Thus, there is an insistence that womyn make commitments to each other in all spheres, including the sphere of sexuality, so as to stop directing energy towards ineffective and ultimately harmful institutions (Bunch, 2000, p. 332). As Johnston stated in her 1973 book *Lesbian Nation*, "When theory and practice come together we'll have the revolution. Until all women are lesbians there will be not true political revolution" (p. 166).

LESBIAN SEPARATISM

Separatism in General

A belief in the disengagement from male-defined institutions and a commitment to directing energy towards womyn-identification eventually tied into the idea of the separation of womyn from male society—lesbian separatism. The idea of separatism was not new to the lesbian-feminism of the 1970s and must be seen in the context of other separatist movements (Tallen, 1988, p. 140). In fact, from Puritans to Black Nationalists, separatism has served as an alternative to assimilation (Card, 1990, p. 127). Separatism has served as a way for targeted groups to establish a new sense of identity and interpersonal connections on their own terms (Card, 1990, p. 128).

According to Card (1990), the politics of separatism can be understood through an examination of *who* is to separate, from *whom* there will be separation, *what* connections will be severed, and *why* those connections will be severed (p. 127). As any given group determines these variables, a separatist politic begins to emerge, but Card emphasizes that separatism can occur in varying degrees. Specifically, looking at *what* connections will be severed brings to light the many ways individuals and groups find themselves interconnected. Thus, part of defining separatist politics means determining which connections to withdraw from while also recognizing that there may not be withdrawal from *all* connections (Card, 1990, p. 128).

Additionally, Frye identifies degrees to which separatism can occur. Separation from an institution deemed harmful might occur via the subtle realignment of commitments, or it may involve "ceasing to be loyal to something or someone" as a means of indicating a shift in priorities (Frye, 1988, p. 63). In this sense, separatism as a general political act can be understood as a move for independence from a nation or political unit deemed in some way problematic (Cordova, 2000, p. 358).

Feminist Separation

In expanding on Frye's assertion that separation can take many forms, all feminists seem to engage in separatism to some degree. Feminists who avoid listening to music with sexist lyrics, who avoid certain relationships, or who withhold commitment to sexist individuals or institutions participate in a form of separation (Frye, 1988, p. 63). These forms of separation allow feminists to cease, on some level, their participation in certain male-defined institutions and thus contribute to the challenging of male privilege. In this sense then, Frye (1988) believes that most feminists "practice some separation from males and male-dominated institutions" (p. 64).

Daly's (1978) understanding of separatism includes the idea that, while there are many shared experiences, each womyn has had her own unique experience with

patriarchy (p. 381). One aspect of defining one's own sense of self and space includes "the necessity for separating at times even from sisters..." (Daly, 1978, p. 382). Daly (1978) explains that as womyn make our own self-discoveries, we also contribute to the "intensity of the Fire that will flame from our combined creative Fury" (p. 382). This is different, however, from patriarchy's isolation of womyn, which serves to stunt rather than enhance growth and self-expression (Daly, 1978, p. 283). Frye (1988) also makes this distinction pointing out that "masculinist separatism," for example the exclusion of females from certain institutions within higher education, occurs "*at the will of men*," an already privileged group; whereas feminist separation is a means by which womyn, as a targeted group, can assert a sense of autonomy (p. 63).

Lesbian Separatism

Yet, the idea of the *lesbian* separatist movement has not been to cease to engage in *some* institutions. As has been previously discussed, lesbian-feminists strongly criticize the idea that the revolution they pursue can be brought about in conjunction with maintaining any relationships to male-identified institutions. Feminists may engage in degrees of separation from patriarchy, but lesbian separatists sought to remove themselves entirely from the world of men—from a world, which men "had taken/dominated for their own purposes" (Lucia-Hoagland & Penelope, 1988, p. 6).

While Spinster (1988) emphasizes that there have always been lesbians, and likely always lesbian separatists, the specific movement of lesbian separatism within the United States began around 1970 (p.99). Many separatists did come from some sort of radical background, though some early separatists were never part of the Womyn's Movement (Spinster, 1988, p. 99). By 1973, lesbian separatist groups emerged around the U.S. and began producing influential newspapers such as *Dykes and Gorgons* and *The Amazon Analysis* (Spinster, 1988, p. 105). Among the most influential publications to provide lesbians with a concept of separatism were *The CLIT* (Collective Lesbian International Terrors) *Papers*, a series of position papers produced by womyn on the east coast and published in *off our backs* in 1974 (Spinster,

1988, p. 107). During the same time, The Furies started as collective of 12 womyn working in Washington, D.C. and were "committed to ending all oppressions by attacking their roots—male supremacy" (Berson, 1988, p. 25).

Defining Separatism

Just as forming a precise definition of "lesbian" has proved difficult, determining a concise definition of "lesbian separatism" is also complicated. In part, this stems from the noted difficulty of placing lesbian separatism on a continuum of degrees to which all feminists separate from patriarchy in some way. Likewise, Lee (1990) provides a broad definition of separatism as womyn "focusing on each other as lesbians and minimizing the energy given to males" (p. 143). According to Dobkin (1990), "Lesbian Separatism has always meant a consciousness, an analysis, and a commitment to the well-being and best interests of womyn in general and Lesbians in particular" (p. 287).

Whatever the definition, I find the essential aspect of lesbian separatism is what it *is not*. That is, separatism is *not* about men. In a sense, that is what makes it the ultimate movement about womyn. Lesbian separatism puts the experiences and value of womyn as a central focus to its efforts. Separatism is also not merely a reaction to or a running away from those systems and institutions deemed problematic. Lesbian separatism is too complex a movement to be disregarded as simply reactionary or a refusal to deal with reality (Lucia-Hoagland & Penelope, 1988, p. 5). While lesbian separatism is not necessarily an end in itself, it is one method by which womyn can gain a stronger sense of self thus, as stated by Gutter Dyke Collective (1988), becoming "a forceful unit in attacking the oppressive elements of society" (p. 31).

Why separatism is necessary

This perspective that lesbian separatism offers womyn a way to both renew a sense of self and gather collective energy is precisely why many lesbian-feminists deemed separatism a necessary aspect of seeing their vision come to fruition. However, to see separatism as simply a phase “during which we learn to feel better about ourselves and get rid of negative feelings so we can function better in coalitions...” is to put separatism back into a patriarchal context (Lucia-Hoagland & Penelope, 1988, p. 5). To do so is to negate the perspective that participation in any system is in fact a choice, something those in power do not want targeted groups to realize for fear they realize participation is a choice, thus withdrawing and rendering the system meaningless (Lucia-Hoagland & Penelope, 1988, p. 4).

Lesbian separatists of the 1970s felt drained in their relationships with men, especially when being in such relationships required constant explanations of their experiences with oppression (Bunch, 2000, p. 336). Not only were these relationships draining, they were also based on unequal expectations. Shelley, for example, questions how womyn can be expected to love the men that terrorize themselves and/or their sisters. She uses this as her argument for separatism claiming that while, “our ultimate aim must be a loving society,” the present reality indicates the abuse of womyn (Shelley, 2000, p. 309). Given the situation, womyn could not possibly be expected to further alternative visions of society while remaining exposed to the emotional and physical harm perpetuated by patriarchy.

This idea is furthered by Solanas (2000) who states in her scathing *SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto*, “If all women simply left men, refused to have anything to do with any of them—ever...the government, and the national economy would collapse completely...” (p. 217). While some have discounted Solanas for various reasons, her argument succinctly summarizes the necessity of separatism. After experiencing struggles within the gay liberation and feminist movements, some lesbian-feminists identified separation as the best possible means for actually affecting change. When they reached a point of no longer trusting in the

existing systems, one choice was to continue to participate in and attempt to change those institutions, the other choice was separation (Lucia-Hoagland & Penelope, 1988, p. 4).

Challenges

While lesbian-feminists were able to make sense of separatism on a theoretical level, they experienced challenges in the implementation of their ideals. While Bunch (2000) emphasizes the potential problems if lesbians (essentially a group of social outcasts) perpetuate "man-made divisions" amongst themselves, being aware is different than actually preventing such practices (p. 334). Without the tools to address the ways they had been affected by patriarchy, many womyn found themselves reproducing exactly those behaviors they had attempted to escape. There was such an emphasis on creating positive womyn's space, that room was not made for internal dissent, which became problematic as patriarchy was exacerbated among separatists (Card, 1990, p. 126).

Those who settled into lesbian separatist lands did so to create a particular vision of woman-identified space. Yet, many womyn found not only interpersonal relationships difficult, they also experienced the hard realities of rural living. Escaping the grips of patriarchy also meant escaping to a life of challenging physical labor. While rural living and the creation of lesbian lands certainly has pros and cons, it was especially inaccessible to those womyn who were not young and/or able-bodied (Cheney, 1985, p. 12).

Additionally, problems arose around the issue of whether or not male children would be welcomed to lesbian separatist land. While some communities made exceptions for boy children up to a certain age, many mothers left land having felt unwelcome. Differences also emerged for womyn of color and womyn from various religious traditions (Cheney, 1985, p. 9). What became apparent was that womyn *qua* womyn do not experience oppression a uniform way and that in fact her age, class,

race, ethnicity, and physical ability make each woman's experience complex. When these realities were combined with the hardships of living on rural land, some womyn realized that this particular vision of rural lesbian separatism was not for them.

SOUTHERN OREGON COMMUNITIES

Most of the literature available about lesbian lands in Southern Oregon has been produced from within the community. In particular, the early years of collective living have been documented in community specific texts such as *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective* (Sue, Nelly, Dian, Carol, and Billie, 1976) and more general texts such as *Lesbian Land* (Cheney, 1985). One of the most prolific sources of information about the lesbian land movement exists in the volumes of *Womanspirit*, a magazine that was published out of Southern Oregon from 1974-1984. While *Womanspirit* attracted global attention, most of the literature has been published by small, local presses or is accessible only through private collections. The womyn of Southern Oregon recognize the incredible nature of their lives and have made concerted efforts to document their "herstories." The shoelace bound *Community Herstories: Living in Southern Oregon* compiled by Tee A. Corinne, contains eclectic accounts of the challenges, sorrows, and joys of the community.

Only a handful of documents have been published by outside researchers. Since 1997, three theses exploring various aspects of Southern Oregon intentional communities have been published (Kleiner, 2003; Sprecher, 1997; Wilner 2000). The research most applicable to my own study was conducted by Sprecher (1997), who focuses on sources of conflict within community structures as well as their patterns of conflict resolution (p. 4). Also conducted as a feminist ethnography, Sprecher's (1997) study is based on her participation with four specific womyn's lands over the period of several months (p. 57) her findings focus on the importance of "lesbian feminist egalitarian ethics" as a social structure alternative to the model provided by patriarchy (p. 41). While intentional communities of all varieties emerged with utopian visions for their communal interactions many, including the Southern Oregon

womyn's community, have encountered difficult relationships and the subsequent need to develop methods of conflict resolution and consensus (Sprecher, 1997, p. 38).

A more widely published piece of research is *Circles of Power* (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000). The intent of Gagehabib & Summerhawk (2000) was to conduct as many in-depth interviews as possible over a six month period. During the seven years that they wrote *Circles of Power*, they intermittently gathered additional information. What resulted was a wealth of material both in the form of interviews as well as demographic survey information (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000). The premise of *Circles of Power* is to explore the metaphor of the circle as it relates to the Southern Oregon womyn's community (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000, p. 13). The circle metaphor is discussed on multiple levels with the broadest being the broader community outside of simply the network of womyn physically occupying land (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000, p. 23). According to their respondents, Gagehabib & Summerhawk (2000) point to the womyn's lands as the core of the womyn's community (p. 37). Within this community exist further circles, circles of strength and support as well as conflict and tension. The metaphor for the dynamics of the lands themselves is a wheel with certain womyn at "the hub" others at "the spokes" and "on the rim" with still others "outside the rim." The resulting image is powerful in understanding the complex interrelationships between the womyn of Southern Oregon.

CONCLUSIONS

Lesbian-feminism and lesbian separatism persist as womyn attempt to put theory into practice in a way that challenges *all* forms of oppression. Many womyn still live on separatist land and continue to create their vision of female-positive, womyn-only spaces. The endurance of these current practices is best understood within the context of the energy surrounding the 1970s lesbian-feminist movement. As with any social movement or political theory, challenges emerge and must be addressed if growth and progress are to be made, and there is much progress still to be

made. Despite the struggles and conflicts often associated with lesbian-feminism and lesbian separatism, the movements have greatly influenced both feminist and gay theories and politics and continue with meaningful contributions to the dialogue of social justice.

METHODOLOGY

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand how the womyn of my study were making sense of their surroundings, I opted to frame my research methods by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is characterized as theory generating (rather than theory testing), and is a process by which the researcher becomes more *grounded* in the data during the course of the study (Bernard, 2000, p. 444). As an organizational framework, grounded theory guides the researcher in identifying categories, themes, and eventually theories through an ongoing process of data collection and analysis (Bernard, 2000, p. 441). The initial stages of research are exploratory with a focus on discovering patterns as they emerge from reading texts, conducting interviews, and engaging in participant observations (Bernard, 2000, p. 444). Subsequent stages of research involve the constant comparison of data, thus the emphasis of this method is the building of theory *grounded* in each step of the research process (Bernard, 2000, p. 452).

While my primary organizational framework is grounded in a desire to generate theory, I certainly did not enter into the field a-theoretically. In fact, various aspects of several theoretical perspectives infuse my research practices. Within the general feminist framework, I have drawn specifically on lesbian feminism. As discussed in the previous section, lesbian feminism stems from the idea of intentional commitment to womyn as a political strategy in direct challenge to patriarchal institutions (Freeman, 1975, p. 141). I also rely on an ecofeminist perspective as a means of reconceiving environmental concerns within a feminist framework (Warren, 1996). Additionally I rely on symbolic interactionism as a way of understanding meaning as mutable rather than intrinsic to any object, place, or event (Berg, 2004, p. 8).

METHODS

Feminist Ethnography

With a grounded theoretical framework in place, the most logical method for the study was ethnography, which is more concerned with the explanation of social phenomena than the testing of hypotheses (Atkinson, 1998, p. 110). Additionally, my particular tools for research are influenced by feminist methods that carry distinct practices and ways of understanding the world (DeVault, 1999, p. 21).. According to Marjorie DeVault (1999), at the "heart" of feminist research lies a desire to re-center the experiences of womyn, which have often been pushed to the margins of knowledge production (p. 30). The intent of feminist research in general is to "understand the experience of women from their own point of view" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 51), which joins well with ethnography's focus of generating oral narratives from participants themselves (Naples, 2003, p. 3).

The womyn's lands of Southern Oregon comprise more than simply a location for data collection; the lands are populated by womyn who have lived rich lives filled with many joys, trials, lessons, and wisdom. Methods such as ethnography, similar to the feminist tradition of consciousness raising, provided a space for the sharing of individual testimonies of womyn through direct, personal interaction with the participants (DeVault, 1999, p. 30). Shulamit Reinharz (1992) further discusses feminist ethnography which, like contemporary ethnography, is multimethod research involving "observation, participation, archival analysis, and interviewing" (p. 46). The ethnographic trend of using multiple methods helps to create a full context in which to situate research. Yet, where traditional ethnographic methods have situated the researcher in a position of authority, intentionally feminist ethnographic methods attempt to minimize the power differentials between the researcher and the participants (Naples, 2003, p. 38).

Guided by this model of feminist ethnography, I made concerted efforts to minimize both the perceived and actual power differentials common to conducting

research. My introduction into the Southern Oregon womyn's community was made through a contact with a womyn I had met at a conference almost a year earlier.

Although womyn have been living on land for nearly 30 years, they are generally quiet about their presence amongst the hills of rural Southern Oregon, thus a personal introduction into the community proved helpful. Once I made one connection in the community, I received numerous invitations to attend events and visit lands, as well as a number of reading suggestions and names of other womyn I might want to contact. Before I began making requests for interviews, I spent time at gatherings introducing myself and attempting to familiarize myself with the womyn's community, likewise providing the community an opportunity to become acquainted with me.

Additionally, I made efforts to provide my interview participants with a high degree of confidentiality. Researchers most commonly change each subject's real name to a pseudonym when reporting data and may further protect an individual's identity by changing names of locations (Berg, 2004, p. 65). Rather than relying on pseudonyms, I elected to remove possible indicators from my reporting. In doing so, and in stating my intentions to each participant, my desire has been to encourage the most open dialogue possible. Identifying my general research location as Southern Oregon provides an important context, while protecting identifying characteristics of individual participants attempts to protect confidentiality and allow less inhibited dialogue of somewhat controversial issues.

Multi-Sited Ethnography

Throughout this study, I refer to the "Southern Oregon womyn's community" and interchange both "womyn's land" and "lesbian land" as synonymous terms. In *Circles of Power*, Summerhawk & Gagehabib (2000) employ a standard dictionary definition of "community" describing it as, "a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society" (p. 22). So while I follow their example and commonly refer to the Southern Oregon womyn's community as though it were a single entity, a more accurate descriptive image might

be what one participant described as the "necklace" of lesbian lands that constitute one aspect of a much broader and richer womyn's community.

Reconceptualizing community in this sense is an adaptation of the more traditional single-site ethnographic methods. While the lesbian lands of Southern Oregon do form somewhat of a single entity, they simultaneously exist as individual lands with unique compositions of residents, practices, and ideologies. Thus, the ethnographic methods of this study are multi-sited in that meanings and identities of the community are drawn from one conceptual community that is actually composed of multiple sites (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). In his article on multi-sited ethnographic methods, Marcus (1995) links this method of research to feminist studies as part of a trend to develop integrated ethnography (p. 97). Challenges to multi-sited fieldwork include both the practicality and ease of data collection, yet for this particular study my desire to create the most accurate picture necessitated ethnographic methods that accounted for travel amongst the network of womyn scattered along I-5.

In fact, the physical setting of each interview was equally important as the interview format itself. Conducting interviews via phone or email might have been more convenient for me, but physically experiencing womyn's land provided data nearly as powerful and meaningful as the interviews themselves. In reference to drawing new residents to Southern Oregon lands, one participant emphasized the importance of falling in love with the land. This sentiment also illustrates the importance of conducting interviews with each womyn's land in the background not only for their unique beauty, but also because of the meaning the physical space holds for each womyn who herself has fallen in love with the land as a space to live out a creative vision.

In a set of field notes dated 09 February 2003, I noted that one significant bias to this study would be my inability to imagine how one could *not* feel close to nature and one's surrounding when living amid such a setting. I gained this insight early in my interview process and continued to make an effort to travel to each womyn's land. I was graciously welcomed into wonderful homes, many of which had been constructed by womyn within the community. Conversations occurred while sipping

tea next to woodstoves and eating vegetables recently picked from gardens. They occurred against the backdrop of mist covered hills, while taking tours of forest covered land, and—most notably—within the steamy walls of a sauna, thus designing multi-sited research by following one aspect—lesbian lands—of an intricate womyn's community.

Interview Format

When I began interviews, I opted for a flexible, or semistandardized, interview format (Berg, 2004; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). I arrived at each interview with a list of topics I knew I wanted to cover, but allowed enough room for participants to speak freely; thus each interview was conducted in a way that Lofland & Lofland (1995) more accurately describe as a “guided conversation” (p. 85). Ultimately, the decision making power both on the topics covered and the final material included in this paper, resided with me as the researcher. The somewhat open-ended interview process is one commonly incorporated into feminist methodology in an effort to re-center the voices and ideas of womyn (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Additionally, the flexible interview format fits well into the grounded theory method of using each interview as a means of guiding subsequent interviews in that the semistandardized format allows for questions to be adjusted between interviews (Berg, 2004, p. 79). While each interview lasted approximately 45-minutes to an hour, some lasted 30 minutes and longer interviews ran almost two hours. Except for two interviews, which were conducted early in the research process, the interviews were recorded, transcribed in their entirety, and coded as themes emerged from each conversation.

I asked questions in each interview that were intended to explore the participant's first exposure to, and impression of, both the community and the lands of Southern Oregon. To womyn who had lived on communal lands, I posed questions about their feelings surrounding that experience as well as their motivations for

exploring alternatives to communal living.⁴ I asked womyn about the importance of community, the creation of "womyn's space," and the meaning of the land itself. As is previously mentioned, since much of the community's history has been documented by residents themselves, a focus of the conversations was to guide each participant to articulate their vision of womyn's community that brought them to Southern Oregon, the manifestation of that vision over their time in the community, and the possibilities their vision might hold for the future of both the lands and new residents.

Participant Observation

The guided conversation format provided me the unique opportunity to gain a glimpse into the richness of each participant's life. Yet, interviews were only one component of my multi-method approach. My first introduction to the community was through what is formally known as The Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group, Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus. The Writers' Group began meeting early in 1981 and has continued to meet every third Sunday, rotating the location amongst the homes of womyn from Roseburg to Ashland (Corinne, 2002b, p. 9). Certainly, Writers' Group composes only one subset of the extended Southern Oregon community, which also includes regular movie nights, brunches, and music concerts. However, engaging with this group on an occasional basis (and even sharing a piece of my own writing) over the period of one year provided me with the opportunity to connect with the whole community over an extended period of time. In this sense, while sharing meals and writing on Sunday afternoons I was able to learn more about the Southern Oregon community than I would have had I simply conducted interviews.

The practice of participant observation supplemented the focused information obtained by semi-structured interview techniques, two practices that Lofland &

⁴ None of my research participants currently live on communal land. In the Results and Discussion I explore the subtle, yet profound, distinction between *communal* and *community* as it pertains to the Southern Oregon womyn's land community.

Lofland (1995) emphasize as having a natural mutuality (p. 19). "Participant" or "Field" observation refers to the research practice of developing long-term relationships through repeated engagement with the interview population, sometimes in the role of inquirer, and more often in the roles of looker, listener, and secondary participator (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 18-19). This method of data collection helps to provide a context for interviews, and in situations where the researcher is already a member in the setting (which is partially the case in this study)⁵, there is often an instant sense of closeness to participants (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 23).

The initial stages of participant observation with the Writers' Group also provided me the opportunity to engage in other community events. Four womyn on one privately owned piece of land host a summer weekend where womyn come together in the heat of July to swim, hike, share food, and display their talents during an evening "open mic." I also had the opportunity to attend the 30th and final WomanSource Fall Gathering. The Fall Gatherings have a long history of being a vital part of connecting womyn through workshops, circles, and recreational activities. During the September 2003 Gathering I was able to participate in a workshop dedicated to discussing the future of lesbian lands in Southern Oregon. The workshop occurred somewhat like a large focus group (though I was an observer, not the convener) in that it presented the opportunity to interact with over 30 womyn on the subject of the future of Southern Oregon womyn's lands. Thus, the data presented in the Results and Discussions section include the breadth of observation and participation conducted over the period of a year as well as the depth of personal interviews with a smaller subset of womyn.

Data Analysis

While what Lofland & Lofland (1995) describe as the "convert" status of sharing a common identity with one's research participants can contribute to ease in

⁵This is discussed more fully in the section on my position as a researcher.

access and understanding (p. 23), it also raises the question of the researcher's ability to maintain objectivity (Bernard, 2000, p. 335). Bernard (2000) stresses the distinction between objectivity and value neutrality, stressing that total objectivity is neither possible nor even ideal (p. 336). Nevertheless, for this project I engaged in a process of balancing my need to maintain some sense of distance from the womyn of this study with my desire to engage with the valuation and preservation of womyn's culture. One method to facilitate this balance was to keep three levels of detailed notes as described by Bernard (2000): one set of reflexive notes on my personal experiences with interviews and observations (p. 358); a second set of methodological notes dealing with the technical aspects of collecting data, which were expanded on to write this section of the paper (p. 361); and a third set of descriptive notes in which I attempted to capture processes and observations that were not accessible through the use of a tape recorder (p. 362).

These detailed field notes, along with tape-recorded and transcribed interviews and material from participant observations comprised the data for this study. The identification of themes from this data was done within a grounded theoretical framework where coding occurs in several stages. The first step in grounded theory research is an "open" coding process during which the researcher explores the data for emerging patterns (Bernard, 2000, p. 444). Once open coding is complete, the researcher begins the process of further organizing subgroups within larger thematic groups (Berg, 2004, p. 280). Having organized the data based emerging patterns, the researcher finally engages in the process of integrating the findings into a narrative (Berg 2004, p. 286).

PARTICIPANTS

Only limited census data exists to indicate the number of lesbians populating Southern Oregon. The ability to account for same-sex households is a recently developed census measure, and the Human Rights Campaign estimates that the 2000

census count of 1,559 rural same-sex households is *undercounted* by up to 62% (www.hrc.org). This difficulty in specifying a sampling frame makes true random sampling virtually impossible (Bernard, 2000, p. 149). Furthermore, the expectation that it might be possible to locate every womyn involved with Southern Oregon lesbian lands since their inception nearly 30 years ago is unreasonable. Even replicating Gagehabib & Summerhawk's (2000) sample of 51 womyn is unreasonable for the scope of a master's thesis.

Thus, for this study, I selected a small interview sample keeping in mind the contributions I hoped each participant would make. This purposive sampling method allows the researcher to construct a small study by intentionally seeking representative subsets of a population (Bernard, 2000, p. 176). In part my identification of participants was based on convenience methods (Berg, 2004, p. 35) in that my sample is based on those womyn who were available, accessible, and willing to participate.

However, based on my preliminary archival research, my participant observations, and my knowledge of the Southern Oregon womyn's community, I was able to select a set of participants that I felt represented the population (Berg, 2004, p. 36). Although my selection was not entirely random, the specific members provided information and insight that can be generalized across the population of Southern Oregon womyn, and possibly womyn's intentional communities across the country.

Keeping in mind Gagehabib & Summerhawk's circle metaphor, I sought participants that represented various aspects of community involvement in hopes of obtaining a number of diverse viewpoints. While several participants might consider themselves, or be considered by others, to reside at "the hub" of the circle, other participants populate "the rim" with the remainder of the womyn composing "the spokes" (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000)⁶. Some of my participants have been involved with the Southern Oregon lesbian lands since their inception while others are newer to the community (with "new" being on a continuum of anywhere from 20 years to less than two years). Some participants spent time in heterosexual

⁶ For further discussion of the "circles" of the Southern Oregon womyn's community, see Gagehabib, La Verne and Barbara Summerhawk. Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian Centered Community. Norwich: New Victoria Publishers, 2000.

relationships and marriages and others have been womyn-identified since birth. The participants are racially homogenous though well aware of the ways in which such a white dominated community has created tension for womyn of color wishing to live on land.

I believe I have realized my intent of selecting twelve womyn who would compose a representative subset of the larger Oregon womyn's community. Additionally, supplementing in-depth interviews with extensive participant observation allowed me a means of interacting with the community on an even broader scale. Thus, while the scope of this project rendered a comprehensive study unrealistic, the voices of the participants weave together an understanding of important themes that can be applied to a larger understanding of the past, present, and future of womyn's lands.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

My initial interest in the Southern Oregon womyn's community was to explore connections between sexual identity and environmental practices. Did something about being womyn-identified translate into one's environmental beliefs and practices? To some extent, such themes did emerge, though mainly in the context of important knowledge that has been acquired by those who have dedicated all or portions of the past 30 years to creating womyn's space. As I conducted interviews and participated in numerous gatherings and events, I discovered the importance of the womyn's lands as alternatives to patriarchal spaces. Part of this includes an attempt to give words to the tangible, yet difficult to qualify, energy of womyn's culture. Understanding why, 30 years ago, womyn-identified womyn sought rural spaces on which they could live out a vision of womyn-focused, healing communities holds more than historic novelty. At least in Southern Oregon, some vestiges of the original communities still thrive, and yet they find themselves at a critical juncture. The current residents are aging and without new energy, without heirs, the continuation of the vision is uncertain.

It is these issues that I intend to explore in this section. Before addressing the future of womyn's lands, I first find importance in contextualizing the discussion with an abbreviated look at some of the successes and challenges of the past 30 years. Part of this includes understanding the vision of creating womyn-centered spaces, the meaning ascribed to the land itself, and lessons gleaned from these connections; but first is how womyn found land in Southern Oregon in the first place.

IT IS OUR HERSTORY

*We our the old womyn, We are the new womyn
We are the same womyn, Stronger than before*
--Circle Song, Author Unknown

The discovery of rural land in Southern Oregon

Something was happening in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Womyn around the country were dreaming of a culture counter to the one they had been raised in. Some womyn were rediscovering goddess-based spirituality. Some womyn craved a connection to nature not afforded them in city life. The individual visions varied, but the overarching theme remained consistent—womyn wanted places to explore womyn-centered culture (Ellison, 2004, p. 39).

Simultaneously, individuals of various genders and sexualities found themselves drawn to the back-to-the-land movement and Southern Oregon was a prime destination. Rural land was inexpensive and building codes were lax (Corinne, 2003, p. 35). Reflecting on this time, several participants in my research with family roots in rural communities recalled a sense of wanting to get out of the city: “my mother’s people were country people and I wanted to return to country.” Another participant notes:

I was wanting to get out of the fast lane...I didn’t know what I was looking for. I ended up at the right place at the right time and found...these womyn and saw them as womyn who had really done the same things I had. They had checked out in the seventies and were a part of the back-to-the-land movement that was happening. I was surrounded by a community of dropouts in some way. A few had been nuns, college professors who had held those kind of social jobs that we know lesbians are drawn to. And they had all just said, “I’m not going to do this anymore.” I felt that I had done all of the things I needed to do, I had fulfilled my obligations to my family, to society.

Regardless of the reasons for coming to rural spaces, the land itself was the reason many stayed, for “the land was beautiful!” So womyn had to find ways to make their dream of rural solitude come to fruition.

Acquiring land

Buying land as a group was more economical for many womyn and it allowed them to acquire more acreage than they could have on their own—and they were resourceful in their acquisitions (Ellison, 2003, p. 40). During an interview, one womyn recalled that: “[a] friend completed a divorce and the appropriate socialist feminist thing to do was share the money, which made it possible for me to think of buying land.” As a socialist feminist herself, she was hesitant to take the money, but in the end, she and her land partner were able to gather just enough money for a down payment.

In general, the economic situation in the late 1960s and early 1970s was such that acquiring land was actually a viable option for some womyn. One participant notes: “I don’t know that I can give you the political economic situation except that there were food stamps and there was a job program. So, there was some support available to womyn who did not want to work in the city.” Another participant echoes the same sentiment: “economics was one reason [that moving to rural land was a viable option], it used to be easier to live on the margins with food stamps and SETA funded jobs until those programs ended.”

Pointing out that some womyn experienced an economic ease that made the purchase of both private and collective lands possible is not to negate any of the intense and very real struggles that have occurred around issues of class. Rooted in a feminist belief in fostering womyn’s community, womyn on private land worked to make their land accessible to womyn of all class backgrounds (Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000, p. 49). Yet, the issue of ownership remained, so the womyn decided to pursue the idea of truly open womyn’s land. One participant recalls the

dream behind land that would be open to all womyn, which led to the establishment of Oregon Women's Land (OWL) Farm:

It was at an open meeting at Womanshare that the idea of OWL Farm came up. These other lands were privately owned but we wanted to have land that was open to womyn who were traveling (we called them gypsies sometimes). A lot of them did not have work at that point, so that the idea of us sponsoring a piece of land that would be open to womyn not on land or not known to us. We were Utopian at that point, unrealistic.

So, the 70's saw an influx of womyn moving to rural land to pursue a vision inspired by a feminist infused back-to-the-land movement. Womyn acquired land in pairs, in small groups, and in the fashion of a collective; womyn were inspired by a dream.

CHALLENGES

*Why did we form lesbian lands? To pursue vision.
And why did many leave? We found out that country life is hard."*

*--Joyce Cheney
Lesbian Land, 1985*

The past 30 years have been characterized by tensions between the vision of womyn's land and the reality of life in the country. The "dream" of "self-sufficiency and independence, creativity and community support" (Corinne, 2002a, p. 7) has been met by arduous meetings, gloomy Oregon winters, and the complexity of interpersonal relationships. The realities of rural life presented a new set of difficulties for the womyn who sought to escape the multi-faceted pollution of city life, even though they were prepared to struggle and survive the challenges of both rural and communal living.

A number of challenges arose as common themes across interviews. An exploration of these themes serves two purposes. The first, which seems somewhat critical, is to bring the vision of womyn's lands out of the realm of the utopic and into the realm of the realistic. That is, a discussion of the realities of creating womyn-centered spaces supports the underlying intent of this research, which is to explore the viability of alternatives to patriarchy. Thus, the intent of *not* glossing over the challenges of the past 30 years is to support the second purpose of this particular discussion: engaging in a realistic dialogue that may ultimately may to be a guide for the future of womyn's lands.

Sustaining energy

One of the challenges has been maintaining the energy to sustain the dream. For example, the reality of OWL Farm versus the vision of open womyn's lands is as one participant explained:

There is nobody who started off at OWL Farm who is still there; the turnover has been terrific. Yet womyn will say, "I lived on womyn's lands. I lived at OWL Farm." And then you find out that they lived

there for two months, maybe in the summer... So they went and they got fed by the dream, but they didn't feel like they needed to do it longer. So you have the dream and you have the realities.

One perspective noted in *Community Herstories* is that OWL seemed to draw the "transient, emotionally disturbed" womyn who needed a place to heal (Corinne). In a sense, the challenge of open womyn's land seems to be the lack of continuity and commitment. Yet, the ability to sustain energy necessary to maintain a vision was influenced by the internalization of "the worst of patriarchy's damage" (Lee, 2003, p. 47).

Perpetuating Patriarchy

In her ethnography of four womyn's lands, Sprecher notes that though the Southern Oregon communities are organized around similar "feminist, environmentalist, humanitarian, and egalitarian ethics," conflict predictably arises within the community (Sprecher, 1997, p. 105). According to Sprecher (1997), the most prevalent source of conflict is the perpetuation of "internalized dominant cultural values" stemming from a lack on the part of the dominant culture to promote communication and effective conflict resolution (p. 107).

As has been discussed in the literature, the intent of lesbian feminism and eventually the migration of womyn to rural spaces was to withdraw from the painfully oppressive culture of patriarchy (Faderman, 1991, p. 238). Nevertheless, what became apparent was that leaving behind patriarchal patterns of behaviors and interactions was more difficult than assumed. One participant realized: "that we are brought up in this culture and we've learned a lot of values from that..." and went on to state: "We just internalize all the shit and perpetuate it and screw each other...and now we're trying to do something very different with all of this internal conflict." Another participant noted: "there are no men here, but we still did bring a part of the patriarchal culture with us."

What became clear to one participant in her journey to create womyn's space was: "[womyn's] socialization kept them from understanding the big picture..." thus she came to understand: "my own resistance to working with womyn was part of internalized hatred of womyn as a group." A repercussion of being raised within patriarchal culture that another participant described as a powerful strategy in keeping womyn separated from each other:

There are many ways people use to disempower others. One is demonizing and dividing us against each other. Historically, womyn have been said to be evil lots of times. It is a strategy to empower some people to do anything they want to other people. I think those are stereotypical patterns of trivializing and making "fun" of others, of disempowering.

I find that this perpetuation of internalized oppression provides valuable insight for a discussion of the importance of womyn's space. Whether the internalized oppression is expressed as classism, racism, abelism, or the repercussions of emotional trauma, addressing the challenges means acquiring skills to heal and communicate—essentially to unlearn the damage of growing up in a patriarchal society. The assumption that the oppression of womyn is somehow situated in the context of patriarchy leads to the question of how to realize the liberation of womyn. Lesbian feminists seemed to believe that the liberation of womyn cannot be fully realized within a patriarchal context. Yet, even as womyn separated themselves and focused energy on space devoted entirely to the creation of a womyn-centered counter culture, they faced the perpetuation of patriarchy. With this in mind, the discussion shifts to conceptualizing the creation of womyn-centered spaces.

WHAT WOMYN DO WHEN THERE ARE NO MEN DOING IT

To work as if the earth, the mother, can be saved. To work as if our healing care were not too late... Work as if the earth, the mother, can be saved."

--Sally Gearheart
The Wanderground, 1979

Realizing a utopia did prove unrealistic, but other womyn's land concepts—such as living lightly on land, sharing resources, knowledge and skills, and creating a supportive community—have endured. In her novel *The Wanderground*, Sally Gearheart (1979) envisioned for "the hill women" (the fictional equivalent of womyn living on rural lands) a way to save the earth from the evils wrought by patriarchy. For the womyn who acquired land in Southern Oregon, the vision was similar: "create a counter-culture, create womyn's space."

The creation of such space was both complex and simple; both a literal space and a tangible location. I interviewed one womyn who lives on what might be considered an extension of womyn's lands though she is actually within city limits. She described her experience of visiting rural lands as such:

To me, when I go... onto the land it is like I have left the United States of America. There really is another culture there. There is a way of valuing womyn and understanding them and just a way of living that is so different from what I encounter in the daily world.

A major challenge of this entire project has been to communicate the *feeling* of womyn-centered spaces within the confines of written words. Undoubtedly my efforts, though well intentioned, fall short. There is no effective way to articulate the power and, for lack of a better word, the magic of being in communion with womyn on land devoted to preserving that very energy. The search for words to describe womyn's spaces led me to solicit responses from those whose daily efforts are to nurture womyn's community. To a certain degree, my efforts resulted in what could be considered measurable evidence of counter culture (i.e., the practices of living lightly on the earth and living in community with womyn, to name two examples). However, much of the following discussion revolves around the symbolic (and less tangible) aspects of womyn-centered space.

Patriarchy

In 2003, the self-proclaimed “feminist newsjournal” *off our backs* published two volumes devoted to the exploration of “alternatives to patriarchy.” In two issues (March-April & May-June, 2003), the magazine explores peace movements, feminist collectives, publications, and projects as a means of resisting patriarchy. Before understanding how womyn’s lands fit into the discussion of alternatives comes an understanding of “patriarchy.” In *off our backs*, Jennie Ruby (2003) defines patriarchy as “a form of society where men’s needs, concerns, and interests are central,” as evidenced in multiple ways, and finishes with the statement, “Patriarchal cultures may also be characterized by class exploitation of people and environmental resources” (p. 38). This last line, which includes both the environmental degradation *and* the degradation of womyn, helps explain why some womyn chose to create their alternatives to patriarchy in rural spaces. As one participant emphatically explained: “Many people came [to the Southern Oregon womyn’s land community] to get away from patriarchy—in quotation marks, in capital letters, in flames!”

Nearly every participant made mention of: “[the] real vision of womyn’s land as being a way to get outside of the patriarchy and do something different, like being outside the system, being off the grid, creating a different culture.” Another participant expands on what living outside of the dominant culture means to her:

I see womyn living on land here and other places that don’t want to turn the wheels of patriarchy. They don’t work for the man...I think that is one of the things that lands affords us. It costs me one hundred dollars a month to live in paradise...This frees you up. I don’t have the expenses that I had, I don’t have the high rent. I live collectively with womyn and we all get together to pay the electric bill, we all pay the taxes. What you create for yourself is an easier life personally, but also in a political sense we take ourselves out of that pattern of turning the wheel.

Patriarchal systems include complex social, political, and economic benefits afforded only to a small, privileged group, so at the heart of creating “alternatives to

patriarchy" is establishing a new system of values. Womyn's lands have provided a way to step outside of the dominant culture.

Separatism

The ideology behind womyn-centered culture as realized in practice is most apparent in the existence of the lesbian separatist movement, which first became unified and visible during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. At the time separatism emerged, lesbian feminists felt that womyn's liberation was hindered by continued loyalty to men (Bunch, 2000, p. 309). Lesbians felt isolated from the feminist movement as a whole, which tended to be more vocal about issues they did not find pertinent to their own lives. Many lesbians found their own concerns subsumed by fights for access to birth control, abortion, and equitable heterosexual marriages. At the time, separatists felt that as long as womyn continued to engage with, and cater to the needs of men, womyn would not be free, and instead would continue to be defined in relation to men (Revolutionary Lesbians, 1988, p. 22).

In the 1970s, lesbian feminism was put into practice around the United States as womyn left a patriarchal culture, which one participant identified as the "perpetrator of much of the world's violence, hate, and destruction" going on to state, "patriarchal culture tries to convince womyn we are not capable." Thus misogyny, which continues to permeate the experience of womyn, is linked to, and perpetuated by, male defined-culture. When the devaluation of womyn is seen as intrinsic to patriarchy, one avenue to the liberation of womyn from sexist oppression is the creation of space that is centered on the values of womyn.

However, not all of the participants in this project, thus not all of the womyn on land in Southern Oregon, consider themselves to be separatists. The identification of this misnomer is important for it suggests that "separatism" may be a patriarchal concept. That is, womyn cannot create counter culture without facing questions and criticism; womyn cannot seem to disengage from that which harms them without

being termed "man-haters." Yet the culture that has been created in Southern Oregon is not about men and it is androcentric to even think that it would be.

Time and again, I spoke to womyn who responded with some variant of "I don't hate men, my choice was to commit to womyn." Thus, the decision to live on womyn's land ultimately has little to do with men. Seeing womyn's community as a place to "focus on and celebrate womyn" requires a shift in perception. One participant explained the ways in which womyn-centered culture is seen as somehow lacking, an assumption that only serves to perpetuate the idea that womyn need men to be whole and complete beings:

With womyn who are attached to men in an intimate way they view separatism as if half the human race is missing, but lesbians fill up the space and don't feel like anyone is missing. We are the important people because our connections are with womyn, which is a very different way of being in the world.

She went on to describe that she "felt like it was not going to work to change men" and rather than walking around with a heart closed off to men, she found "the simplest way to avoid this was to be around womyn as much as possible."

The maintenance of womyn-only space has been practiced to various extents on different lands over the past 30 years. Not all womyn in the community consider themselves separatists, rather as one womyn stated: "we're not out of the loop, but we step back." That is, those who are actively creating womyn-centered spaces make decisions about the extent to which they will engage with the dominant culture, a right which is specifically realized by womyn owning and making decisions about their own properties.

Another participant stated that she "never envisions living with men again," yet she now finds she is able to interact with men, concluding, "when they do things that upset me, I can always leave." Another womyn explained, "some lesbians will have male relatives visit or will have male children on the land" though she emphasized that her particular space "is entirely a space for womyn." Additionally, over the course of the past 30 years, womyn have hired men for such tasks as delivering firewood. However, more important than whether or not men have entered

onto womyn's lands is the point that womyn themselves have set the boundaries. In this sense, the womyn-owned lands in Southern Oregon serve as a clear example of womyn claiming a right to define their own spaces.

Literal Spaces

As the womyn I interviewed spoke of the importance of womyn's lands, they quite often referenced the importance of their physical spaces. Violence against womyn is a powerful and pervasive force inescapable within the confines of patriarchy. The terror of violence is an ongoing threat for womyn in *all* spheres of life from public spaces to private residences, what Andrea Dworkin (2003) terms the "landscape of the ordinary". Thus, establishing land with the intent of promoting values alternate to those of patriarchy can be a powerful way for womyn to assert their right to safety.

When I brought up this question of safety in one interview, the womyn I was speaking with replied: "we've succeeded in being low profile and we don't want to be known in this county. This to protect our sense of safety, which depends on being low profile." I asked another participant how she felt about the presence of lesbian communities in rural Southern Oregon, given the occasional open hostility towards gay and lesbian individuals⁷, and she responded:

There is a level of hostility, but there is a sense of acceptance. I have been in a twelve-step program for over twenty years and within that group I am out. What being out there means is that people aren't supposed to talk about who they see at meetings, so it is a relatively safe place. But people will come up and say, "I have a lesbian daughter," and in a large part it helps me understand who my neighbors are. PFLAG⁸ did the same thing, so now I drive through town and I think, 'Oh, right that is the store where they have a 17 year old gay son.' It have also gotten to know a lot of gay men in the area and now I know I can go into certain places and have a quick hit of queer space because I get a hug from the gay owners of the store.

⁷ Anti-gay measures appeared on Oregon ballots in 1988, 1994, and 2000 and received support from conservative groups in several Southern Oregon counties (*Basic Rights Oregon*).

⁸ Parent, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG) is a national non-profit organization with affiliates across the United States.

In this sense, the womyn of Southern Oregon have found ways to consciously create a sense of safety that begins on womyn's lands and extends into spaces within the community.

A slight variation on this theme is described by a participant who stated:

"Womyn are abused in so many ways from birth; 30 years ago womyn needed a place to heal, and so they created womyn's land." She then continued to explain the importance of preserving a safe and healing space for womyn:

I believe that patriarchal society is very disabling for womyn's full development. When a woman becomes aware of that, she wants to correct it. All womyn have been poisoned to different degrees. The recovery process or the healing process, or the re-learning process, whatever you want to call it, is slightly different for every woman. Womyn's land can be a sanctuary for womyn to heal. Womyn can leave that male dominated environment for one afternoon, or three days, or three months, or three years. I now feel strong and clear enough to go out into the male world. The culture today is not poisoning womyn in the same way, but I need safe and supportive womyn's space to maintain my strengths.

To return to a discussion of the necessity for womyn to disengage from patriarchy, what one womyn describes as "traveling in a lesbian world" has been one important way for womyn to "get over being fearful of who we are." The assertion is *not* that disengaging from patriarchy will be an easy task, only that there are vital (and viable) alternatives to the existing system. Another participant echoed these sentiments believing:

We each have a right to set our own boundaries where we feel safe and we're the only ones who can know this, for ourselves. We need to respect what each person needs for her to feel safe and to recognize that we may all need something different to heal.

Womyn's lands thus exist as places where womyn can create, rather than fight for, safe and healing spaces. This shift in perspective is subtle but the implications are profound, for room is established to explore womyn's-centered culture as something in and of itself. Separatism as a reaction to patriarchy was a starting point; the potential of womyn-centered space is that it can become what one participant

described as a commitment to "creating something womyn-focused and womyn-defined."

Creating Community

Certain aspects of "womyn-focused" community are easily identifiable; that is, one characteristic of the Southern Oregon womyn's community on a whole is the number of events and gatherings intended to facilitate connection. My first connection was through the Writers' Group, which is only one part of the whole reality of womyn's lands, but nevertheless, an important part. Writers' Group was founded in 1982 as a place to encourage womyn to write. Since the group's inception, hundreds of womyn have joined the every-third-Sunday meetings, participating as they feel comfortable (Corinne, 2002b). While some womyn visit the group only once, others make regular attendance a priority. One participant recalls:

I was first introduced to the Oregon community through Writers' Group and most of the womyn were living on womyn's land, which was a new concept to me...I had the opportunity to come to Writers' Group. My first feeling was "these are my people! I have found what I am looking for!"

Before Writers' Group became one avenue for both the fostering of community and the development of womyn's writing potential, there was *WomanSpirit*. *WomanSpirit* was a magazine primarily focused on womyn's spirituality that was headquartered in Wolf Creek, Oregon. For ten years, from Fall 1987 to Summer 1994, *WomanSpirit* drew contributions and readership from around the world ("The Ultimate Issue," 1994). A number of womyn I spoke with cited the magazine as their introduction to the presence of womyn on land in Southern Oregon. Specifically, one womyn recalls those womyn that found their way to Southern Oregon by way of *WomanSpirit*:

These were womyn in their late 20s and early 30s. They read *WomanSpirit* and they knew we opened production of the magazine. We worked as a collective and published the magazine four times a

year, so womyn read it *and some wanted to be a part of it*. Womyn were traveling, heard about it, and stopped to see us and work with us.

Although *WomanSpirit* is no longer in publication, self-publishing continues to be a trend in Southern Oregon with benefits such as earning a supplemental income from publications as well as continuing the trend of womyn writing about their herstories. Additionally, *Maize: A Lesbian Country Magazine* has emerged as a regular publication that connects womyn on lands across the United States.

In 1974, the same year that the first issues of *WomanSpirit* was published, a non-profit feminist organization in Ashland named Womansource held the first Fall Gathering. For 30 years, the Fall Gathering drew womyn to Southern Oregon to share in workshops, rituals, and community building. September 2003 marked the final gathering, an event that had been a considerable drawing point for the Southern Oregon community.

Each of these aspects of the Southern Oregon community, along with a number of events and gatherings not mentioned, exemplify connectedness. Despite the fact that womyn live on lands from Roseburg to Ashland, there is incredible continuity at events and gatherings. During the course of my yearlong fieldwork on the Southern Oregon lands, I attended a number of gatherings and was welcomed each time as a visitor into the increasingly recognizable community. This sense of community extends beyond formal social gatherings. I witnessed care for the members of the community in a variety of forms from assistance with land maintenance tasks to support through illnesses and hospital visits. One womyn reflected on her connections to the community:

I think for me it has been the sense of people caring for and about one another. It is not always true, it is not true of everybody all the time, but in a general way there is a great deal of caring within this community and a sense of connection.

Another womyn spoke of this connectedness as solidarity:

So partly, it is that acceptance and interest and enthusiasm for womyn that was there as a part of womyn's space, that is part of what founded this whole thing, that attitude about womyn. And I think it is still there among the womyn...I still see it and I still feel it, that interest and

encouragement. It doesn't come automatically with all womyn's space, but I think womyn who seek all womyn's space probably have it, so it concentrates us. It *really* is there, it *really* is a feeling... Just going somewhere else where there is a different set of values and a different way of being, that is what we're trying for!

Figurative Space

Clearly, the presence of womyn's land serves as tangible evidence of womyn's space, yet there also exists an aspect that is difficult to depict—the mental, emotional, and spiritual space. Each respondent provided insight into the ways in which womyn's lands serve as a “different psychic universe” existing outside of the dominant culture. One participant described the reason she values womyn's lands:

I do think it has to do with the fact that there are places where you can go where there is womyn's culture, where there is womyn-only space and womyn-only land. It just feels so good to be in a place like that. Partly I know that is a generalization and that they have all kinds of problems once they get onto the land, but on the other hand it is still there. There is such a welcomeness of womyn on the land. It surprises me sometimes to remember that [the lands exist] in the United States of America... I go to womyn's land and I really have left one culture and gone to another and it is a better culture than the more misogynist culture I'd find in most other places if I actually traveled around the world. You can sort of take for granted an understanding of feminism and lesbianism and it is so nice.

Another participant remarked, “when I look at the trees [that are on womyn's lands] I don't see something a man is going to cut down, I don't see things poured over with concrete.” She then paused, looked at the window, and concluded, “How can this not change you? This land belongs to itself, it does not have the energy of the city where even a park has that energy, this land has the energy of itself.” I explored this idea of “energy” with another participant who replied, “Womyn's land is a sanctuary where womyn are valued and where womyn's values are important, where womyn are at the center of focus.”

While my initial question posed to participants explored the womyn-centered space on the lands themselves, the following response explains the conceptual existence of womyn's space:

I think lesbian space is primarily, for me, an intellectual concept...To some degree we find ways of creating it in the oddest places sometimes. If I go in to these two guys' store and they greet me warmly and come out and give me a hug, we have created something different than if I walk into the bookstore and the heterosexual Mormons who run it, who have lots of children, are nice to me. It is a different feeling of where I am. It isn't that they're not nice to me, but there is a different feeling of space.

This perspective is particularly important in exploring a myriad of ways to resist patriarchy. Living full-time on womyn's lands is not a viable option for all womyn, yet the benefit of these spaces need not be confined to the physical land itself. Rather, the potential implication is that "whether we 'live on land' or not, we are always resisting patriarchy by degrees" (Ruby, 2003, p. 39). For example, one womyn describes an act of resistance:

So the lesbian space for me has to do with the possibilities for being lesbian, being openly lesbian. Last night, my lover went into surgery. There we are in the hall with the guy who was pushing the gurney and our mutual friend, and the womyn sitting down in the surgery waiting room are all around and I leaned over and I kissed her. I thought, "if anyone has trouble with this then it's their problem" and in a sense I was creating a lesbian space.

This example is similar to Frye's (1988) belief that acts such as refusing to listen to misogynistic lyrics on the radio or declining to watch certain movies are forms of separatism (p. 63). That is, some womyn chose to live their "alternative to patriarchy in the midst of patriarchy" (Ruby, 2003, p. 39). Thus, alternatives to patriarchy can be seen as existing on a continuum: "If four lesbians go out to dinner together they are creating lesbian space around the table. That is one end of the continuum. The other end is this dream of womyn's land and a place that will keep that."

Though this supports the idea of womyn's spaces "as an attitude as much a physical space" another participant emphasizes that womyn's spaces outside of patriarchy remain important:

I think about if I lived in the city, more like *Dykes to Watch Out For*⁹ where we all just lived in different houses. I know that there can be kind of lesbian land in the cities, but you can't have fire in the city; you can't drum into the night. There are things you can do when you are out on land, there are less rules. You really can live differently.

Who are the womyn

Even after conceptualizing “womyn’s space” as a combination of both the literal and symbolic, the question remains: “What is a womyn?” My intent in exploring the value of womyn-centered counter culture is *not* to delve into a philosophical examination of what defines “woman.” A thorough evaluation would be another paper entirely, but the discussion deserves some attention, for it is on the often unspoken periphery of what defines “womyn’s space.”

As has been discussed in the literature on lesbian separatism womyn-centered culture is most often intended for biological females who identify as womyn. Specifically, lesbian feminism addresses the erasure of “lesbian” within both feminist and queer movements (Jeffreys, 2003; LaRetis, 1997). The most public controversy has been the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival policy of admitting “womyn born womyn only” (Miya-Jervis, 2002, p. 68). The decade-long debate began over whether the festival would include male-to-female transsexuals, and has since expanded to question the inclusion of female-to-male transsexuals, intersex individuals, and those who identify neither as men nor womyn (Miya-Jervis, 2002, p. 69).

Ultimately, the issue is relevant for Southern Oregon womyn’s lands on two levels. Each individual womyn I interviewed spoke about what makes her comfortable on her individual land. Some womyn were adamant about wanting to maintain space for biological womyn who identify as womyn. Other womyn spoke about wanting to get to know a person’s “energy” and making decisions on an individual basis. Although no one addressed this specifically, much of the sentiment seems to stem from a larger feminist issue, which is whether womyn are responsible

⁹ *Dykes to Watch Out For* is a popular comic strip created in 1983 by Alison Bechdel. (www.dykestowatchoutfor.com).

for the liberation of men from patriarchy. Many womyn have elected to separate in order to create womyn-identified culture, not to direct their energy toward changing men (Revolutionary Lesbians, 1988, p. 23). In this sense, womyn on private lands have every right to enforce practices that make them feel safe in their spaces, as one womyn describes:

I think it is important that there are places to chose to have only womyn-born-womyn amongst the choices so that people have that space if that is what they need. It is important that that's there and that's available...my gut feeling is that I guess I do feel the woyan-born-womyn thing holds importance for me. There should be spaces where everyone can feel safe, I encourage it, but they may not be the same spaces. There is no reason that all of womyn's land has to be inclusive in that way. The men's lands should be able to say that they are men instead of feeling bad that they don't let womyn on the land. I think men should have male space. So personally, I think it is important that womyn are able to make the choice to have womyn-born-womyn space.

Yet, the issue remains as to what policy to uphold at larger community gatherings. At Writer's Group, for example, there was a question about whether or not to include a male-to-female transsexual. The final sentiment was: "At Writers Group our writing is for the most part about our personal lives and the group process is that you share that writing." However, the same individual was welcome at a womyn's movie night where the focus is more social and less about womyn's personal lives.

The example mentioned above is not an isolated incident and to my knowledge, the issue has come up at least once since I have finished my interviews. An exploration of who exactly is welcome in womyn's spaces will likely be an important consideration for the future of womyn's lands. However, for the purposes of this paper's discussion of the creation of womyn-centered counter culture, "womyn" is henceforth taken to mean a biological female who self-identifies as a womyn.

LIVING ON THE LAP OF THE MOTHER

We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature.

We are nature with a concept of nature

--Susan Griffin

Woman and Nature, 1978

One aspect of womyn's space is figurative; yet, while "lesbian space" can be created in a restaurant or a hospital, the fact that womyn have also chosen to create these spaces on rural lands is significant. Specifically, within the fields of natural resource management and geography, "sense of place" is increasingly used to suggest connections between self-identity and values attached to specific places (Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels, 2003, p. 87). The implications of discussing the lessons womyn have learned from living on the land are twofold: first, they hold implications for future inhabitants of the lands themselves; and, secondly, they suggest connections between social group identity and environmental values.

Lesbian land and the politics of place

One aspect of resistance has been to counter patriarchal environmental values that give humans, or more specifically men, dominion over nature¹⁰. The implications of realizing such connections are great, for they suggest that the presence of the Southern Oregon womyn's lands creates not only liberatory feminist politics, but also liberatory environmental politics. The beliefs and practices embraced by the 1970s back-to-the-land movement were reconceptualized in the early 1990s by the idea of "place based" collaborations. This concept is discussed extensively in various aspects of natural resource management literature to explain the ways that shared-group identity influences the value placed on a "distinct geographic area" (Cheng, et al., 2003, p. 88).

¹⁰ In *Ecological Feminist Philosophies: An Overview of the Issues*, Karen Warren (1996) discusses this relationship further by identifying eight connections between feminism and the environment.

The common sentiment that emerged both from personal conversations and from reviewing the writings of womyn on land was the desire to leave the pressures and negative energies of city life. Womyn felt "totally disconnected and unlinked from the sources of [their] survival," not knowing directly where their water, food, and energy came from, and wanted to create a life in which their survival depended more directly on community and the earth (Lee, 2003, p. 43-44). This vision, that has been pursued by womyn on land since the 1970s, aligns well with the notion of "place-based collaborations." Such collaborative partnerships, as described by Cheng et al. (2003) "tend to center on problem solving [and] emphasize trust building" (p. 88), ideas that are quite evident in the practices engaged in by womyn on land.

Connections with nature

Lesbians living on land have in a sense established their own "place-based collaborations" that resist patriarchal forms of resource management. While none of my participants used such specific terminology, their ecological values were evident on every piece of land and in every home that I visited. For example, water is acknowledged as a vital and exhaustible resource thus the presence of flush toilets is limited. Many womyn have spent years off the electrical grid and those who do use electricity both limit their use and continue the discussion of the feasibility of alternative energy sources such as solar power. Though many of the lands in Southern Oregon are either populated by harvestable timber, or are surrounded by lands that have been and will continue to be logged, none of the womyn's lands is used to engage in the practice of commercial logging. Vegetable and herb gardens are abundant sources of food during the growing season with soil replenished by composting.

A number of womyn did speak specifically to both the freedom and connection to nature afforded by rural living. Several participants mentioned the benefits of lands that are removed from other kinds of civilization:

I was thinking of how you can run around with your shirt off or womyn in the garden with just their boots on, things like that, that you just couldn't do [in the city]. Certainly the beauty of the land is a big draw and living in little cabins where you really are close to nature where several times a day you are sitting there looking at the forest.

Another womyn I spoke with expressed the same sentiment:

Here I can have a more direct connection with nature, I can take off my clothes and be in contact with the elements so easily. We had a bonfire here two moons ago and it was like, "take your clothes off! Fire roast you cunt...under the stars!" How good is that? You can't do that in the city!

These expressions of the freedom of rural life reinforce the idea that the fact that lesbians have selected to live in rural spaces is of great significance. Womyn are damaged in a patriarchal world by impossible standards of beauty. One of the magical aspects of womyn-centered spaces that is difficult to put to words is breaking away from patriarchy's gaze, which is facilitated by rural locations and the company of womyn.

Lessons from the land

Over the past nearly 30 years, the womyn of Southern Oregon have learned a number of important lessons about the land and about themselves. Womyn I spoke with praised the lands they live on and many felt wealthy beyond material possessions, or as one participant stated, she feels, "land rich, but money poor." The praise directed specifically at the land itself is important, for not only did it draw womyn to Southern Oregon, it has inspired womyn to stay.

This sense of awe for the surrounding physical spaces of Southern Oregon seems to be apparent among those who live so closely to the land. For the womyn who have created their lives "on the lap of the mother" there is also a sense of reciprocity as well as a need to be patient and attentive. The land very clearly belongs to itself and the womyn have desired to learn to "live with whatever the earth is

doing.” This means, for example, that if a downpour breaks a water line, then the options are “either to go out in the rain to fix it, or go without water.”

However, as one participant noted: “the reward for paying attention is enormous” and that while she affects the land, the land affects her in return and is available to teach her when she is willing. Another participant echoed similar sentiments in describing her relationship with the land:

There is so much individuality here that you have to create out of your own goodness, out of your own trust, out of your own loving, to say I look at this land as my equal in every way and if I do that she will look at me that way. You have a piece of the truth and I will listen to it, that is mind-blowing, it opened me up to a much better life.

Yet the beauty of life and the abundance of the land are matched by death, which was an acute lesson for several of the participants. For each year a womyn spends living closely with the land, she watches the seasons change and each season, “things get born, they grow, and they die.” The cycle “is easy to acknowledge with plants,” but more difficult to acknowledge with beloved animal companions and with other womyn. Several lands now embrace the remains of womyn who have passed on, the implications of which will be discussed along with future directions for womyn’s lands.

From these deaths come lessons of how to grieve and the knowledge that death is balanced by the idea of endurance and renewal. Every year the seasons see the passing of life and usher in new growth. These lessons were amazingly portrayed in an example given to one participant and myself near the end of our mid-morning conversation. While we were sitting in the light of the large windows in her home, we heard a thud, and then we looked outside to see a bird sprawled on the deck. She turned her tiny head and tucked it under her wing as though preparing to give over her life. The womyn I was interviewing took no more than a moment to decide to attend to the fallen bird. Slowly and cautiously she walked to where the bird was sprawled. Gently she extended her hand to cover the bird’s small body, and as she did, she began to stroke the feather and sing. As if her touch made the bird call upon her energies, she started to move, unsteadily at first and then with more confidence. Eventually, the

bird took flight and perched on the womyn's head. Both moved slowly to face the sun on the horizon, communing until at last the bird felt she was ready to take flight. At the end of the exchange, which may have spanned as long as an hour or as short as ten minutes—time seemed to stand still—the womyn came back inside, looked me in the eyes, and said: "That was most important. If you can write that down, that is your answer."

While womyn's lands are indeed beautiful, rural living does provide a number of harsh realities. One participant specifically pointed out the importance of "falling in love with the land" because idealism and Utopic visions are moderated by the fact that daily life is affected by the weather. However, one womyn reminded me that, "at the same time all those things that make it so hard to make it work are just what gives it its wonderfulness." Thus, in a sense, coordinating work and life cycles with the rhythm of the seasons is a remarkable shift from city life where the cycles of the natural world are virtually irrelevant.

By seeking ways to create alternative lifestyles that are simple and in touch with the cycles of nature, in spite of the hard work and challenges, womyn have been rewarded both with valuable lessons as well as a sense of empowerment. Becoming self-sufficient was commonly stated as part of the vision of womyn's lands specifically as a means to disengage from consumerist culture. This also seems to be in response to the restrictive gender roles that have limited womyn's possibilities. Lesbian identity further facilitates a sense of self-sufficiency. As one womyn reminded me: "being a lesbian means not being dependent on men." She went on to explain that men grow up with an "I can do it attitude...men have that sense, but womyn have a different attitude."

As I spoke with another participant in the kitchen that she, and other womyn, had built, she looked around and asked, "How many womyn have built their own kitchen?" She concluded: "it is empowering to live this way especially since I started out not confident with my physical ability...now I take responsibility for my life support systems."

This sense of confidence and empowerment flowed in part from feminist encouragement of womyn to discover and strengthen their abilities in many areas such as fixing cars, driving trucks, and working in ways not traditionally considered appropriate for females. Womyn on land continue to be an extension of the sense of confidence building that can occur outside of patriarchal constructions of womyn's perceived abilities. Womyn were involved in the critical aspects of establishing themselves on lands from wiring and plumbing the homes they had constructed to setting up gravity flow water systems and composting toilets. When I asked one womyn where she acquired her knowledge of construction, she replied: "It wasn't in college!" Instead, womyn learned by trial and error, by reading books and asking questions, and by sharing skills amongst themselves, thus for many womyn living on land has taught them to say: "I can do this!" And I'm not going to go out and hire some man to do it."

LESBIAN LAND FOREVER

*We'll get there, goddess knows how
We will get there, we know we will
--Circle Song, Author Unknown*

The discussion of the future of lesbian land did not start with this project; rather, my visits were simply well timed. For womyn on land in Southern Oregon, the perpetuation of the lands themselves as well as the vision they embody are important. Individual womyn and groups of womyn on individual lands have made efforts to ensure at least the heritage of their own lands. I spoke with each participant about her individual efforts, but the most profound experience was my participation in a formal community meeting held at the 2003 Fall Gathering. I can think of no better place for womyn to gather and discuss the community's future than at the 30th, and final, gathering for an event that had initially drawn many womyn to the Southern Oregon community.

Aging

The reality for womyn in Southern Oregon is that the 20, 30, and 40-year-olds that founded the community are now 50, 60, and 70-year-olds. Aging is a significant theme both in the sense of how it effects womyn's ability to care for the land as well as the need it creates for care of aging womyn themselves. That is not to say that womyn are no longer capable of the physical demands of rural living, though the reality, as one womyn stated is that "to maintain a mile long water line, you have to be in good shape." At least two womyn pointed out that age has changed their "energy and focus." One womyn reflected: "I have noticed for the last several years that I don't want to work as hard; there are other things I want to do now." So the issue is not entirely ability, but also desire.

Land Trusts

As womyn age without necessarily identifying "heirs" for their land, one assurance of perpetuity has been the formation of land trusts. The idea of "holding land in common for the common good" is not simply a response to aging; rather, the initial idea behind land trusts was to counter patriarchal ideas of ownership (Lee, 2003, p. 46). Rather than create divisions between those who own land and those who rent, the idea behind land trusts is collective control and responsibility. A number of womyn spoke of wanting to create ownership of their lands in the form of non-profit organizations and land trusts so that the: "the land can stay womyn's land."

However, one womyn noted that the process of incorporating lands has been challenging: "Doing this has presented difficulties in working with a bureaucracy and with the government for womyn who aren't used to working that way." On the other hand, some womyn found that turning lands into non-profit organizations was a way to use "the man's tool" for the benefit of lesbian lands:

[W]e take what corporate patriarchy has created to keep itself safe, and we say hey, lets use this to our advantage. We can create non-profit corporations and put name our land as an asset of that corporation...not one of those where we're going to do a public service, it is a mutual benefit, it is for the benefit of womyn who live here... We don't own it, the corporation owns this land, we are the corporation. Thank you corporate America! Thank you guys for thinking this up!

Not only does this model help to equalize the power of ownership, it also protects any individual deed holder from the threat of a lien being placed on the land if her private assets become endangered. When land is held as private property, the individual owner has personal liability. One womyn recalled her experience as a property owner before she moved to Southern Oregon:

All my adult life I've owned property...you don't own property, property owns you, you're always responsible for all the cares, all of the upkeep...I don't own this property and it is so freeing to know that I'm secure here, nobody's going to ask me to leave—unless I get a dog, a man, and a gun.

Another womyn spoke of similar benefits afforded by considering alternative

models of ownership:

I think the Land Trusts are important...we need to understand how to protect our assets, to have the ability to invest long term in these lands. For instance, the French don't own their farm lands. They have rights in perpetuity, a social land system that allows people to act as if they own the land and then pass it on to future generations.

However, land trusts only ensure the perpetuity of the physical lands, not of the visions each land embodies. Regardless of whether womyn reach a point where they are no longer physically capable of taking care of their lands or they find that their focus is shifting, land trusts are only one step in ensuring the future of the Southern Oregon womyn's community; the need for re-vitalizing energy remains.

Re-visioning

In part, attracting the energies of new womyn involves re-visioning the lands themselves. Two related sentiments emerging among some womyn are the idea of womyn's land as a place for aging womyn, the realities of which are previously discussed, and as a place for womyn's bodies after death. The implications of both are significant because the experience of womyn within patriarchy is compounded by age. Several womyn echoed the notion that: "it is important that as womyn age we are listened to and that we have choices and autonomy," two aspects which are generally *not* present in the dominant ideology of care for an aging population, at least within the United States of America. Thus, several womyn have expressed interest in exploring a care-taking network to help maintain the needs and resources of aging womyn.

While such a vision would require the serious undertaking of making lands more accessible for aging womyn, a more realistic option at present is the possibility of designating lesbian lands as burial sites for womyn. At least two lands in Southern Oregon embrace the ashes of womyn who have been returned to the earth and at least one more has served as the site of a ceremony to grieve the death of a community

member. These practices set precedence for an important dialogue regarding the care of womyn's bodies after death.

Re-visioning also includes a discussion of how much land it is feasible to keep retain. One question that emerged during the community meeting was: "Is it necessary to keep them all?" While no definitive conclusion was reached, one womyn responded: "we need to figure out which lands could be made more viable and possibly sell some of the other lands." The sentiment she tried to convey was: "the lands don't have to last to have been important." Yet, the thought of making decisions about which lands to sell is difficult, as each space has a rich herstory and meaning for the community.

While only one land currently has no residents and several other lands have spaces for new residents, another womyn pointed out: "Having space on this planet is crucial even if womyn's lands are not being lived on." This comment is important as it was made within the context of a war-crazed political climate and, though it may be perceived as apocalyptic, there is some validity to the idea that there might be a time when it could be important to have rural land as safe spaces. At the very least, one womyn pondered whether the United States Government's engagement in war with Iraq would: "start a shift in ideals, encouraging more womyn to want to get away from the city and embrace rural life."

Villages

One aspect of re-visioning womyn's land has already been set in motion in some places. Several participants noted that, for some of the reasons listed previously, certain aspects of collective life can prove challenging. For some womyn, the discussion of the future of lesbian lands includes reconceptualizing arrangements on the land. Some womyn elect to live in a community as opposed to a commune. The distinction is subtle, but the implications are not. There are several examples of lands where residents share the land and many of the responsibilities for its maintenance while preserving fully autonomous living quarters. While many of the early womyn's

lands were devoted to communal living, the trend seems to be towards community living.

The community discussion at the Fall Gathering focused on the idea of "villages," stressing the importance of being connected though not necessarily collective. In *The Little Houses on Women's Land* (2002), the phrase used to describe the arrangement on womyn's lands is "conceptually collective rather than communal living" (Corinne, p. 6). One participant describes the meaning of this phrase:

People have come together and lived, but for the most part people have had the freedom to pursue their own goals while at the same time living near one another and participating in group activities. It is not your classic commune with either a driving, overriding belief system that everyone shares, it is a much more flexible belief system... You don't have that kind of an overriding theory even though people in general believe in goddesses and nature worship, but for the most part people have been allowed to go their own way in pursuing that belief... Probably if you saw the lands as a loose confederation of lands, then that would give a clearer picture of community than any other conceptual way.

That is, while the lesbian land community in Southern Oregon is conceptually a single entity, each land has autonomy. On a micro level, some lands function as villages within the larger community, so that several womyn may live on one piece of property while still maintaining their own personal lives and spaces, coming together for consensual decision-making around issues regarding the land. One participant spoke of the collective process as such:

The challenge we meet after being collective members is that sometimes we end up living with womyn that we wouldn't necessarily pick as our friends. But the womyn who are here now as collective members have the one thing in common that says I would rather live...[here] than...have whatever it is that [is not] allowed.

While some womyn find such autonomy as described above to be a factor in the success of the community model, others find that a sense of common life is missing when womyn become too isolated within their own homes (Sprecher, 1997, p. 85). Though aspects of communal life may be sacrificed by the village model, what persists are the ideas behind living as an intentional community such as sharing both

the financial and upkeep responsibilities of owning land, practicing consensus as a decision making tool, creating space to honor womyn, and joining in community connections. As it is, the lesbian lands in Southern Oregon do not share an overarching ideology, thus womyn on each land are able to determine what works best for their particular collective. However, one commonality remains and that is a need for significant influx of new residents.

Womyn Finding Their Way

Establishing an effective collective model is an important endeavor for each land, yet eventually the focus widens to include a discussion of if and how womyn will find their way onto lesbian lands, both in Southern Oregon and around the country. Almost everybody is looking for new residents, but new womyn do not seem to be interested in joining established collectives, at least not en masse as was the case in 1970s. During the formation of the community, womyn were drawn to Southern Oregon by such publications as *WomanSpirit* out of Rootworks, the book *Country Lesbians* detailing the early years of WomanShare, and magazines such as *Country Women*. One womyn reflected that these "all contributed to the formation of this community" and wonders "how are womyn finding their way here now?"

In part, there no longer seems to be the same migration of womyn traveling around the country as individuals or in small groups looking for places to stay. When asked for a possible explanation, one womyn replied:

I don't know. If I understood the younger generation better maybe I'd know better! I don't know if they just don't value all womyn's space as much or if they just have so many other things on their mind like having a career. It is hard to know how "back to the land" fits in to all of that. Really, the Womyn's Back to the Land Movement came out of the Back to the Land Movement in the sixties with the hippies and people who were so fed up with our culture and wanted to move off onto the land and do something else...It was sort of a cultural phenomenon to move back to the land, and that sort of disappeared in the eighties except for the people who were sticking it out. I don't

know if it is the womyn's movement or the whole back to the land movement that is really not there like it used to be.

What is happening "out there"

Certainly, this brings up an interesting question of whether there is even a movement generating energy similar to the back to the land attitude of 1970s lesbian separatism. Whether young womyn acknowledge our *herstory* or not, we are what one participant described as "building on the separatist movement that womyn [such as herself] started in the 1970s; womyn today are building on what has been accomplished over the past 30 years." She continued by saying:

Younger womyn are aware on some level, but they need time. One of my favorite sayings is "If we can't convince womyn that men are oppressing us, the men will prove it themselves!" When they get the job, when they get harassed, or don't get promoted they will become more aware of the issues. It's a long-term process and I see that there are many strategies needed and we can each do it in our own way. In the '70s we were these "outrageous bitches" and now womyn don't need to be outrageous as we were then because we already did that. They need to be outrageous in new ways.

What is questionable is whether womyn are still seeking intentional communities as methods by which they can detach from patriarchy. The lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s very clearly merged with land based ideas of moving to the land to foster an earth-based feminism (Ellison, 2003, p. 40). However, the same trend does not seem to be evident at the same magnitude that characterized the formative years of lesbian feminism. One womyn speculated that today's feminists have their own ideologies:

[S]ince the seventies the climate has been so different too of people really feeling like they want to make money and have hot water, computers, and things like that. Though, womyn on land now manage to have hot water and computers too! But it is not so easy and certainly having a job, that's one of the hardest things really. How do you support yourself?

Someone else's vision

Yet, the issue is not entirely that lesbians are not interested in land. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Even in the absence of a large-scale movement, individuals and groups of lesbians *are* looking for land. Arguably, they are looking for land through much of the same processes that womyn engaged in 30 years ago. That is, womyn are looking to start their own lands, *not* join someone else's vision. One womyn observed:

We constantly see ads in *Lesbian Connection* and *Maize* about looking for womyn to begin a new collective and find land. But there is all this [established] land and we're crying for womyn to come, why don't they come? When womyn answer that question they're saying, "because we don't want *your* dream, we want to create *our* dream."

Overwhelmingly, womyn concurred: "a lot of womyn who want to live on land don't want to join someone else's scene and find it difficult to become a part of someone else's dream." Several womyn also offered similar speculations citing American ideals of independence as influential in driving womyn to explore the autonomy of having their own land. In fact, one womyn replied: "I think it is almost like a spawning urge or something, similar to how people keep having babies instead of adopting them. Maybe it is really primal." So the issue is not necessarily a lack of desire among womyn to live in rural, womyn centered communities. Rather, to some extent, the issue seems to be that womyn want to pursue their own visions and create their own experiences.

Re-inventing the wheel

Certainly, the desire to create and pursue one's own vision is understandable; in every recollection of the challenges of the early days of communal living, womyn recall the sense of empowerment at establishing themselves. Thus, the "Lessons" portion of this paper is included not only to highlight important pieces of knowledge

to pass on to future generations, but also as evidence of the meaningful lives womyn have created for themselves. To read about the sense of accomplishment womyn feel at building their own home may make some womyn want to live in a womyn-built home, likely other womyn feel a desire to build their *own* home. That is, part of the experience that womyn have been creating for themselves over the past 30 years is the acquisition of incredible knowledge and experience.

There is a delicate balance between sharing wisdom and skills with other womyn while still respecting the difficulty in telling someone that which is most effectively learned through experience. That is not to say that the wealth of information acquired over the past 30 years should be abandoned so that younger womyn can start their own experience anew; there is something to be said for learning from our herstory. Now, if a womyn wants to build her own home, set up a composting toilet, or wire her studio she can learn from other womyn. One womyn specifically stated: "I want someone to take on this work who can learn from womyn instead of from men like I had to do 26 years ago... it feels good that now we have become a resource and can teach other womyn."

To abandon such knowledge and opportunity would be what several womyn described as "reinventing the wheel." One womyn described the danger in disregarding the 30 years of work that has gone into establishing intentional communities in Southern Oregon:

[T]here is so much attrition rate for start-up communities, its like the odds are that if you start up something from the beginning it won't last. So few make it past the first five years or so, why not go with something that has the infrastructure set up?

Clearly then, if Southern Oregon's lesbian lands are to continue as viable alternatives to patriarchy, there is a need to focus on merging the knowledge and experience of womyn on land with the budding visions of new womyn who are drawn to the lands.

Integration

Making space to combine new and existing visions will undoubtedly prove challenging, yet as one womyn stated:

We have to be open to the womyn that come, to integrating their dream into ours. The future depends on womyn coming, and wanting this, and falling in love with living in the country and this space.

Womyn on land recognize: "it would be good to get young womyn involved...there are womyn in the 35-45 range that are involved, it is the womyn in the 20-35 range that are missing." Nearly every womyn I spoke with emphasized the need to find new energy and rejuvenation to enhance the future though even when new womyn find their way to womyn's land, the joining of new and current residents results in a unique set of challenges. One source of potential conflict is power dynamics, both around age and experience (Sprecher, 1997, p. 109), though current residents are well aware of the "need to minimize the power imbalance between womyn who are new to the land and womyn who have been living on the land."

Nevertheless, integration requires acknowledging that both womyn coming into the community and the womyn already on land operate on certain assumptions about intentional communities, ecological values, and even separatist practices. Well aware of the challenges around integrating new residents, one womyn described the practice of the land she resides on as "kind of like an arranged marriage." She continues:

Womyn come along and want to live here and we don't know them so we say, "ok, you meet the qualifications—you're a lesbian who wants to live here."...[We have] set up this policy that you spend one year here in a trial residency before you're accepted as a collective member. That has eliminated a lot of problems because it is really hard to fake it for a whole year.

While trial residency does attempt to ensure compatibility between new and current residents, there is a recognition that new womyn on the land are in a difficult position. Especially in the aforementioned practice of trial residency, a potential resident spends a year in a rather powerless position as long-term visitor. The concern

of successful integration is equalizing power issues, and the challenge is: "when a new woman comes, she has to be open to listening to us and we have to be open to listening to her." The lands need new collective members, but as one womyn candidly stated: "Of course we'd like womyn to come who have our vision that say, 'oh yes, this is how they're doing it and we're going to keep doing it that way.'" She went on to explain: "Well that's not going to happen. We need to be open to what the womyn who come will want...and of course, she will accept some of how we're doing it and she'll bring her own new ideas

CONCLUSIONS

CONTINUING THE DISCUSSION

Understanding the lessons and empowering experiences of 30 years of womyn's land is important as such visions and experiences motivate the discussion of the future. Reflections on womyn's lands elucidate challenges of both communal and rural living, evolutions of visions and womyn themselves, and an accumulation of knowledge and experiences. Outside of womyn's lands, the structural inequities of patriarchy persist: conservative beliefs put the reproductive rights of womyn in danger, war as a problem-solving technique is commonplace; soil, water, and air quality are compromised; and the list continues. Alternatives to patriarchal realities remain important and womyn's lands form a crucial aspect of resistance.

A number of writings have been published that reflect on the challenges of communal living¹¹. Though there have been struggles, the idea that country communes "died" before the 1980s is not, as this paper has shown, entirely accurate (Faderman, 1991). As with any experience of historical significance, there are important lessons to be learned from womyn's experiences on land over the past 30 years. Conceptually, communal living seems an ideal avenue for developing resources, knowledge, experience and relationships. Yet as one womyn, who has been involved in intentional communities both in Southern Oregon and in other locations since the 1970s, writes, "Sisterhood was not enough...[g]rowing up in patriarchal America had not prepared us for living the kind of life we desired" (Lee, 2003, p. 47).

Certainly utopian quests to live communally on land brought to light issues of class, race, physical ability, and a host of other interpersonal challenges. Yet, the historical point to be made about womyn on land is that they tried to work out these issues in the first place. Womyn envisioned womyn-centered spaces outside of the realm of patriarchy and they tried to pursue their visions. Furthermore, many womyn

¹¹For further reading on communal models both in Southern Oregon and across the country see: (Cheney, 1985; Corinne, 2003; Faderman 1991; Gagehabib & Summerhawk, 2000; Sprecher, 1997).

are *still* pursuing their visions, and that is why this inquiry of womyn's lands is important.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BE?

To be effective, the discussion about the future of womyn's lands must be inclusive. One side of the dialogue stems from the womyn who own and have owned land—how do they prepare to carry on the visions that they have created? How do they pass on their land to other womyn who will carry on the same community? What do those womyn who have dreams underway do to make space for other womyn? Many of these questions were explored during the Community Meeting at the 2003 Fall Gathering and have been continued informally since then.

New efforts to support and maintain womyn's lands in Southern Oregon came to my attention near the end of my research. Efforts have surfaced to establish an organization called Southern Oregon United Lesbians (SOUL). As has been discussed, the Southern Oregon womyn's community can be described as a "loose confederation of land." Womyn maintain a sense of autonomy while still sharing in a vision. One potential challenge to officially "uniting" lesbians in Southern Oregon will be countering the idea that autonomy will be subsumed under a larger ideology, which is the exact patriarchal construct womyn have attempted to discard. At this point, the womyn-energy behind SOUL seems very much to be directed towards the best interest of the community and the womyn themselves.

In particular, part of the dream of SOUL is to incorporate new energy into the womyn's land community. Such efforts are essential. The other side of the discussion about the future needs to give voice to those who will move onto lands, and consideration to the present concerns of lesbians, particularly those from the 20-30 age-range, in urban areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The perspective of this particular inquiry has been that of womyn currently on land as they search for new residents and ways to perpetuate their visions. Certainly, this is only one side of the dialogue that will be necessary to ensure the future of womyn's lands and the continued vision of womyn-centered spaces. Undoubtedly, new residents will have ideas of their own and it will be up to them to develop a meaningful vision. In order to incorporate visions, there is a need to know what young womyn are thinking. Are they interested in what rustic, back to the earth living has to offer? Many of the lands are paid for and there are only minimal maintenance expenses, so possibilities for the future are endless, but there must be initial interest that draws them to the lands. This project has provided a foundation for exploring the future of womyn's lands, but the need to understand the lives and visions of this potential landdyke population frames important question to ask in future research!

LAST WORDS

Over the course of this project, I have been touched deeply by the strength of womyn who stand in literal and metaphorical circles of community, the graciousness of womyn who open their homes and lives to those who inquire, and the beauty of womyn who gather together to share their truths. Ultimately, I am unable to predict the future of womyn's lands, but I believe in the power and the vision that such spaces, and the womyn who hold, them embody. I conclude with one womyn's vision of lesbian lands...forever:

I don't know what the future will be. I hope that I get to shape some of it in my lifetime. I live in this beautiful house and I know when I'm not living in it, some other lesbian will live in it. That's the big goal of the whole thing, that we have these lands and we will pass them on to other lesbians...There is somebody else, I don't even know her name, but I'm doing it for somebody else. I think all the womyn here feel that way—lesbian land forever! Other lesbians could live here, and maybe they'll do it differently, but they'll go, "wow! What a great idea this was!"

So mote it be

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