Where Have All the Lesbians Gone?

They've come out as non-binary.

By Katie Herzog

On an evening in early November, I was sitting on my couch watching *Victorian Farm*, a BBC series about people living like time-travelers back to rural Victorian England—albeit with video cameras tracking their every move. One of the cast members was stretching a

pig's bladder over a crock of preserves, when my wife, firmly back in this century, read me a headline that had popped up on her iPhone.

"Listen to this," she said: "There are only 15 lesbian bars left in the entire country."

"Great," I said, "There are only 15 lesbians left in the entire country. We'll each get our own."

According to the article, only .025 percent of the bars currently in existence in the U.S. cater specifically to lesbians, down from 206 bars in 1987. Obviously, the numbers have always been small in comparison to straight bars and gay male bars (perhaps lesbians are more prone to staying home with our wives and our weird TV), but the decline is another sign that lesbian culture is dying.

There are several causes for the near extinction of the lesbian bar, even before the pandemic. For one, a lot of them sucked. The first ones I went to in my early 20s were dank, smoky caves where women in khaki shorts and backward caps grinded on each other to Outkast. They could have been frat bars if not for the notable absence of men.

There's also the basic economics of running a bar that caters to a tiny slice of the population—a population that, in reality, might not have much in common with each other besides who they fuck. Plus, as cities have gotten more expensive, many of these bars that already operated on thin margins have been priced out. One prime example is the Lexington, an infamous dyke bar in San Francisco's Mission District where the tagline was "Every night is ladies' night." The Lex closed in 2015 after nearly two decades in business, and where it once stood is now a cocktail bar that serves a Negroni infused with Cocoa Puffs for a mere $24.

There's also technology at play. People don't have to meet each other in gay bars anymore when you can pick up your phone and start swiping. Granted, apps for gay men seem to thrive while apps specifically for gay women tend to be both anemic and unfortunately named. The first lesbian dating app was called *Brenda*, which sounds about as sexy as a house full of cats. It no longer exists, so I assume Brenda moved out to the country with her wife.

Then there's the natural course of assimilation. As homosexuality (and bisexuality and pansexuality and all the other sexualities) have become more accepted in American culture, there's less need for our own separate spaces. You don't have to go to a lesbian bar to get a drink with your girlfriend anymore because you'll be welcome at any other bar on the street.

Of course, people have long lamented the death of gay culture. Andrew Sullivan wrote about this with mixed feelings 15 years ago in *The New Republic*. But there's something else going on right now because it's not just lesbian bars that are disappearing; it's lesbian as a category itself.

"Who Crushed the Lesbian Bars?" This question was posed by writer Ellena Rosenthal in the Portland alt-weekly *Willamette Week* in 2016. The rest of the headline points to an answer: "A New Minefield of Identity Politics."

Rosenthal's piece explores what happened after Portland's last lesbian bar closed in 2010. There were attempts to start lesbian-specific nights at various venues, but most of them avoided the term to appear inclusive of trans and nonbinary identities and to prevent the headaches that accompany the word "lesbian."

Those who didn't avoid the term were sharply criticized for it. One event, called Temporary Lesbian Bar, apologized after being accused of condoning "trans women exterminationism" for using the labrys—a double-headed ax that symbolizes female strength and has long been a part of lesbian iconography—in their logo. That event still exists (or did before Covid) but the organizers make sure to advertise that, despite the name, it's "open, inclusive, and welcoming to all people."

Portland may be a parody of political correctness, but the movement away from the term "lesbian" has spread across the U.S. One woman, an academic in the Southeast, told me that when she mentioned to a colleague that she's a lesbian, her colleague "reacted like I'd confessed to being a Confederate Lost-Causer. She told me that the term is outdated and problematic, and I shouldn't use it." Now, she fears that being honest about who she is will cost her professionally. "It's like living in a second closet," she told me... anonymously of course. There's some irony in this: Not long ago it would have been the Christian right stigmatizing homosexual women. Today, it's also people who call themselves *queer*.

I've seen this sort of angst over the term "lesbian" in my own social networks, with fights over women-only bars and teams and clubs. It's especially apparent online, where women-only groups have started rebranding to include non-binary and trans identities, sometimes adding an "x" to the word "women" (i.e., "womxn") to signal that they don't mean strictly female. Oddly, these fights only seem to occur around women's space, not men's. If gay bars, bathhouses, and clubs go extinct, it will be because of Covid, not because of infighting over inclusion.

So why is this happening? And what was it like to be a lesbian before the exodus? I wanted to get the perspective of someone who saw the early days of gay liberation, so I called a woman whose name you might not know but whose work you almost certainly do.

Liza Cowan, now 71 and living in Burlington, Vermont, has been a radio host, a designer, a magazine publisher, a button-maker, and, for a while, the head of the Woodstock Chamber of Commerce. But she's most famous for a single photo she took in 1975.

If you've been anywhere near the internet in the past five years, you've probably seen it. Cowan's then-girlfriend Alix Dobkin leans against a house, holding a copy of the feminist novel *Les Guérillères*. She has short hair, red plastic glasses, and she wears a gray turtleneck with a t-shirt on top that reads: "THE FUTURE IS FEMALE" in all caps.

The 1970s were an exciting time to be gay, Cowan told me on the phone. She hosted a women's radio show for WBIA FM in New York, and Dobkin, a folk singer, made music specifically for lesbians. One of her songs, "Lesbian Code," is a jaunty, jokey number about the things lesbians call each other, some of them still in rotation (e.g., baby dyke and Goldstar, which refers to a lesbian who's never slept with a man).

After Cowan left the radio show, she and Dobkin toured across the U.S. and the world, often via train. Dobkin would play at coffee houses, colleges, theaters, festivals, and the day after the shows, they would meet in local women's homes for good old-fashioned lesbian brunches, where women bring dishes to share would all sit in a circle telling their coming out stories and talking about feminism, women's liberation, and "raising consciousness." What they never talked about was gender identity, Cowan told me. No one did. The concept, for them, just didn't exist.

Cowan wasn't much for bars, but she spent plenty of time in lesbian bookshops. There was a network of them across the country, and The Future is Female shirt was created for one of them: Labrys Books in Greenwich Village (which, yes, had the same ax symbol that some in Portland now consider offensive).

At the time, Cowan told me, there were maybe 10 of the shirts made in total. In 2017, the Museum of Modern Art requested one for an exhibit, but Cowan couldn't find any of the originals. Replicas, however, were mass-produced after her photo was posted by a popular feminist Instagram account and went viral. Now the shirts are everywhere, although Cowan

herself would never wear one. (Neither would I. Someone gave me a cheap knock-off and I now use it to clean my boots.)

“Back then, it was sort of a metaphysical puzzle,” she told me. “What is the future? Are we talking about a thousand years from now? Are we talking about a second from now? It gave you something to think about. Now it just means you bought something. When it shifted from a puzzle to a commodity, I thought, why would you want to wear something that everyone else wears? I’m not a follower.”

By the time I came out in the early 2000s, the term *lesbian* was fading and *queer* was on the rise. Lesbians were seen by most of my friends and peers as stodgy, old-fashioned, uncool, whereas queers were hip, edgy, and inclusive. “Queer” was also vague enough to mean nearly anything, and so it said less about who you actually sleep with and more about your personal politics. (The term has now become so meaningless that I propose we all start using the Kinsey Scale instead.)

This trend away from “lesbian” has accelerated since then. At the same time, the number of possible labels has gone up. Instead of just hetero, homo, or bi, there’s now pansexual, omnisexual, sapiosexual, asexual, autosexual, and many more, each with their own little flag. The same is true of gender, which has expanded to dozens of labels and counting.

The most popular among these neo genders is nonbinary, which the nonbinary actor (or maybe it should be “actorx”?) Asia Kate Dillon described as those “who feel that their gender identity falls outside the traditional boxes of man or woman.” (Dillon is one of a number of formerly gay-identified celebrities who’ve come out as non-binary in recent years. The list includes the writers Eileen Myles, Masha Gessen, and Judith Butler, and performers Sam Smith and Jonathan Van Ness, who say that while he prefers the pronouns “he/him,” he also goes by “she/her” and “they/them.” Why limit yourself to just one?)

While the variance that Dillon describes has long existed across certain cultures, the origins of the term “non-binary” as it applies to gender are surprisingly difficult to find. We do know that it was preceded by the term “genderqueer,” which was coined by trans activists in the 1990s, but “non-binary” doesn’t appear in the academic literature until the year 2000. Even then, it was largely limited to queer studies for the next decade, when it leapt from academia to the internet, spreading from Tumblr and queer blogs to the mainstream.

And spread, it did: According to a Pew Research survey published in 2019, one in three members of Gen Z knows someone who goes by gender-neutral pronouns. That same year, Merriam Webster's Word of the Year was "They."

The number of people identifying as trans has clearly spiked over the past decade, but it remains nearly impossible to know the precise population of trans people in the U.S.—in part because the definition changes depending on who you ask. Some people, for instance, say you must experience gender dysphoria to be trans, and others argue that you don't. There have been attempts to quantify this population but they vary widely, from one in 30,000 males and one in 100,000 females to 390 adults per 100,000.

For some trans people, particularly older ones, the nonbinary identity is in fundamental conflict with what it is to be trans. And this makes sense: If your deepest desire is to live as and be accepted as the opposite sex, why would you want to dismantle the concept of sex altogether?

Yes, some trans people, including those who have taken hormones or had surgery to address gender dysphoria, call themselves nonbinary (and many non-binary people consider themselves trans, whether or not they experience gender dysphoria at all). But according to the National Center for Transgender Equality, most trans people identify as either male or female. Appearing as one or the other is precisely why they transition.

Dana Beyer, a retired surgeon and the executive director of Gender Rights Maryland, began transitioning in the 1960s, when trans healthcare was almost non-existent. In an interview, she told me that she thinks of non-binary as a "political identification. And that's okay. That's fine. In the '60s we did all kinds of things to piss off our parents too." While she adds that she's a full believer in individual liberty and would never tell anyone else how to identify, she also said she would be happy if non-binary was uncoupled from the trans identity.

Unlike an old-school trans woman like Beyer, for many people who identify as non-binary, coming out is more superficial than surgical. It's an update sent out to friends and family on social media, maybe one that says, "I'm nonbinary and my pronouns are they/them." This tends to generate lots of likes.

For this population, adopting new pronouns (and sometimes new names) is supposed to feel liberating. In my own conversations with nonbinary people, they often say that terms

like male/female, gay/straight, or man/women are inherently limiting, and that new identity labels are a way of rejecting the traditional male/female designations.

But for others, this concept doesn't dismantle gender roles and stereotypes; it reinforces them. It legitimizes the idea that there's an intractable gender binary in the first place. This ideology is a direct conflict with earlier lesbian activism, when the goal was to expand the notion of what it was to be female, not contract it.

"If a woman was driving a truck, it didn't mean she's a man, it meant she was a woman driving a truck," Liza Cowan told me. "If a woman was wearing pants and had short hair, that didn't make her a man. It made her a woman in pants and short hair."

Joycelyn MacDonald, the editor in chief of the lesbian website AfterEllen, has observed this change in queer ideology as well, and she finds it deeply regressive. "I definitely see an acceleration of people who think of womanhood as if it were synonymous to femininity, and that it is concerning," she told me.

"When we say that feminity is equivalent to womanhood, we leave no space for women, gay or straight, to be gender non-conforming. Butch lesbians especially have fought for the right to claim space as women, and now women are running from that instead of boldly stepping into it. It's another way of saying 'I'm not like other girls,' and it's demeaning to other women."

Rather than saying, "I'm a woman and I reject gender roles," as Liza Cowan did, the non-binary label says, in effect, "I reject gender roles and therefore I'm not a woman." It might be liberating for the individual, but what does it do for everyone else?

This is not a popular position in queer communities, and AfterEllen is routinely accused of being transphobic for centering lesbians to the exclusion of trans and nonbinary identities. In 2018, the nonbinary comic Rhea Butcher tweeted at AfterEllen: "You don't represent me or my friends and your website is a sham. You're not a lesbian/bisexual website, you're a TERF website." ("TERF " stands for trans-exclusionary radical feminist and it is not, to put it mildly, used as a compliment.)

Butcher's response is typical, and it's part of what makes having this conversation so fraught. After I put out a call on Twitter asking women for their stories, my inbox filled with emails from lesbians who said vast portions of their own friend groups have adopted new labels and pronouns, typically "they," and less typically variations like "xir," "zir," or even "it." They're observing this in real-time, but they don't feel like they can openly discuss it, which is apparent by the number who asked to remain anonymous: all of them.

There's been no clear polling on the shift from "lesbian" to "nonbinary," and so my sense that the lesbian is endangered is purely anecdotal. But there are plenty of anecdotes. The youngest lesbian who reached out to me was a 21-year-old student I'll call Halle.

"Lesbians are pretty thin on the ground for Gen Z," she wrote in an email. "I have one other lesbian friend, and together we have collected reports of five other lesbians between the US and Canada, of which three are in our generation. … I do not know how things were in olden times for the elder gays, so I admit that a paucity of lesbian friends may in fact be normal for twentysomething gay women in left coast liberal cities, but I like to imagine there was some Arcadian past where short-haired women in Carhartts could gather in groups greater than two. I have also heard legends of 'femme lesbians,' but as yet have never encountered one."

Halle doesn't live in Iran. She lives in *Seattle.* And it's not like her peers identify as straight. In fact, they don't: A 2017 survey from GLAAD found that 20 percent of Millennials identify as LGBTQ, including 12 percent who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming.

Another young woman, who I'll call Louise, also told me that lesbians in her social networks are uncommon.

"There's a really thriving, active online and in-person trans community and queer community," she said, "but there's hardly anything for lesbians, and if you try to create that, you get pushback. It's not cool to be a lesbian in the same way that it's cool to be queer or trans or non-binary."

Louise herself identified as non-binary for four years. This was at least in part, she says, her way of dealing with trauma (as a child, she was sexually assaulted by her father) and because puberty was difficult for her. She was uncomfortable with her body, which, she thought, was a symptom of dysphoria. She started to think she wasn't a woman and came out as nonbinary first and then, four years later, as a trans man. Her partner was trans too, and together they ran a blog that was popular with trans people.

Shortly before Louise was scheduled to start her first testosterone injections, she began reading accounts of detransitioned women online and started to think that maybe she wasn't trans after all. She decided not to go through with the hormones, and soon after, her

partner changed her mind as well. The community they had built, however, did not take this well.

“We had a little bit of internet fame for being two gay trans guys, and when we made a post about what we were doing, everyone freaked out on us,” she told me. “It was really hard to have people we’d known for a long time being like, ‘You deserve to die. I hope you starve.’"

Despite losing that community, things gradually got better, and now, she says, “I love being a lesbian.” She and her girlfriend have gotten involved in women’s movements and says she now realizes that what she experienced as a teenager—that discomfort with her changing body—didn’t mean she wasn’t a woman.

“It's totally a normal thing,” she says. “You don't have to be trans or non-binary to be uncomfortable with your body.” Sometimes, that discomfort just means you’re a teenager.

For some individuals, the move to non-binary is a good-faith attempt to dismantle gender norms and hierarchies. In 2019, for example, Farhad Manjoo—a straight, cis, married father of two—argued in the *New York Times* that we should all go by “they” to break the “prison” of gender, although surely it’s possible to break from this prison without erasing sex altogether, as gender-neutral pronouns attempt to do. For others, the movement to “they” is a genuine effort to deal with gender dysphoria. But dysphoria itself is uncommon—and not all nonbinary people experience dysphoria in the first place.

So what else is going on with the mass adoption of this neo identity? There are theories.

Some feminists argue that women are so oppressed in society that opting out of womanhood is a way of opting out of oppression. I’m skeptical. Of course, sex-based oppression exists and women are particularly vulnerable in many respects, but on the whole, life has never been better for women, at least in the West. Not all that long ago, women couldn’t own property, vote, or take their assailants to court. My mom is Liza Cowan’s age and she grew up thinking she could be a nun, a nurse, a secretary, or a teacher. That's it. Thanks to women’s liberation, things changed, and she spent most of her career as a professor. Yes, there are ceilings yet to break, but women truly can do almost anything in the U.S., and if there are barriers, they are more likely due to class than to one’s sex or gender.

So I don’t think it’s oppression, especially when you consider that enbies (as nonbinary people call themselves) are more likely to be Smith undergrads than those who are more

objectively oppressed—say, immigrants getting assaulted at the border. Instead, I have a different theory, although it's not a particularly satisfying explanation or one people who call themselves non-binary like to hear. In short: it's a fad, a form of social contagion.

I'm aware that this theory will be offensive to some people. The concept of a fixed, internal gender identity has become sacrosanct, and it's viewed as something deeply personal and meaningful, like the soul. But humans are social creatures and we're easily influenced by those around us. We copy each other in everything from the food we eat to the clothes we wear to the things we do to the values we hold. This isn't a moral judgment, just a fact, and I've seen how it plays out. First one person in your circle comes out as nonbinary, then another, then another, and then one day half the dykes you know go by "they." Then add social media to the equation, fawning profiles of non-binary people in the press, and you've got yourself a mass phenomenon.

I ran this idea by a therapist who specializes in LGTBQ issues. (She asked to remain anonymous, so I'll call her Tara.) Tara told me that while she sees patients of all ages, they have different issues. In some ways, this makes sense: Our problems change as we age. But what's interesting is that while the most common complaint from her younger female patients is struggles with their gender identities, it just doesn't come up with her older patients. They might struggle with their sexuality or their relationships, but aside from a small number of adult transexuals with dysphoria, gender identity is almost entirely an issue among her young female patients, most of whom, in another era, would have been considered gay women. And young women, in particular, do appear to be prone to social contagion. We've seen this before, from eating disorders and cutting to strange fits of laughter and even (forgive the term) hysteria.

When I asked if what's happening now could be a form of social contagion, Tara paused for long enough that I thought she may have hung up the phone.

"Yes," she said. "But I can't really say that to anyone."

There's some unfortunate irony here. By keeping quiet, Tara knows she may be harming some of her clients. She's deeply conflicted about this: Her job is to help people understand what is going on in their lives, but if she were truly honest about what she's observing, she fears that she would lose not just her clients but her professional reputation. The risks are too great.

Or maybe it's not a fad. Maybe what's happening now is just the next evolution, a march towards a future that isn't male or female, man or woman, but gender neutral and non-binary. Everyone will go by "they" and the traditional roles and norms that have held

both men and women back will disappear as sex-based categories dissolve. That's certainly possible. "Lesbian" as a label might endangered, but it's not like women (or whatever you want to call us) will ever stop loving each other. That, I suppose, is the optimistic way of looking at it. But for people like Liza Cowan, there is something deeply sad about generations of females who don't want to be lesbians or even women.

"What do we lose when lesbians disappear?," Cowan said. "Everything. We lose our name. We lose our sense of self. We lose our ability to gather. And the more taboo it becomes, the less of our history gets told. In a millennia people will be saying, 'We heard about these creatures called lesbians. They'll dig up our bones." But bones, of course, cannot talk, and by that point, the lesbian may be as extinct as the Victorians.