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**THE VAST UNSAID: LESBIAN ERASURE AND CELEBRATION**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Academic Faculty

By  
Kara Ireland

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University

May 2022

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## Literature Review

In my study of North American lesbians from the 19<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, I've discovered that this is a group that has been continually expunged, trivialized, and discredited. The intention of my Capstone project is to create a space exclusively for lesbians (without racialized or gendered constraints) because I do not believe they should have to incessantly fight for inclusion. From a myriad of authors such as Annamarie Jagose, the Lesbian History Group, Lillian Faderman, Adrienne Rich and more, I have realized that lesbians often cannot find solace in queer spaces; this is because they are typically outnumbered by gay men, trivialized and/or invalidated by bi- and pansexual individuals, and over-scrutinized on the basis of gender (non)conformity, sexual expression, and other identity-based factors. Additionally, in women-centric feminist spaces, lesbians are often overlooked, discriminated against, and silenced in favor of unilateral gendered progressiveness; as Jagose provides, *lesbian issues* are not *feminist issues*, and therefore do not take precedence in the feminist agenda.<sup>1</sup> This exclusion is not only imposed on them in supposedly 'safe' spaces, but also in and throughout history with biographies, sexology, as well as feminist and queer histories.

These observations have inspired me to study and document the preservation of lesbian history with a specific focus on intimacy, love, and romantic communications between women. From various authors publishing nonfiction books about or including lesbianism including the Lesbian History Group, Leila J. Rupp, Annamarie Jagose, Bonnie Morris, Trisha Franzen, and Esther Rothblum and Kathleen Brehony, I've gathered some crucial points about how poorly lesbian history is documented. Most of the sources I've read are advocating for lesbians by means of combatting stereotypes, preconceptions, and misinformation. Many of these sources do

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<sup>1</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 46.

not place much emphasis on intimacy between women, confessions of love, or explicitly romantic admiration. I am not concerned with the sexual practices of lesbians, but many of my sources have focused primarily on that aspect of romance and love; so, as a result, I intend to create a digital archive seeking to explore how lesbian women establish agency, familiarity, and privacy in digital spaces. This digital archive may include a series of tweets, screenshots of social media posts, video footage, and textual submissions through an anonymous digital drop box. My intentions are to give visibility to issues around inclusion and intimacy in the digital age, but to also prioritize ethical modes of sharing and safe measures of doing so.

I want to compile exclusively lesbian letters, journals, notes, texts, and books to create a space that celebrates the romantic aspects of lesbianism. In the digital age, loosely defined by IGI Global as “the time-period in which personal computers and other subsequent technologies were introduced to provide users the ability to easily and rapidly transfer information,” there is an increased likelihood of being outed considering one’s digital footprint.<sup>2</sup> The need for “safe spaces” has skyrocketed due to unbridled access and harmful situations upon potentially being outed on mainstream media sites. Hence, my initial focus is on maintaining the exclusivity of this ideally lesbian-centric domain to protect the shared content, identities, and reach of the posts. I watched several documentaries, read numerous stories, and have listened to the testimonies of various lesbians who reported feeling shame, fear, and overall backlash when contributing to spaces not intended for them. A trend in the consumption of these materials is that lesbians would be silenced or buried in discourse of other women who like women, but still oriented their lifestyles around men in some way—thus alienating them from the lesbian

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<sup>2</sup> IGI Global, “What Is Digital Age,” IGI Global, last modified 2022, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/resource-sharing/7562>

experience; their advice would be skewed, their conclusions misaligned, and their orientations misrepresented. Throughout all the content I digested, I concluded that the time for an authentic and exclusive lesbian space is now, and I want to be responsible for creating it.

### Definitions

Beginning with the definition of *lesbian* is of the most importance because I need to be clear about who I am addressing, who is included, and what it means. Unfortunately, many of the definitions I have encountered have been unsatisfactory because they prioritize sexual relationships amongst women. The femininity, womanhood, and romantic capacities of lesbians are often questioned and tested amidst a society that disbelieves women can lead full lives without men. Therefore, I believe having the expectation of older generations of women engaged in homoerotic or otherwise romantic relationships with women to self-identify as *lesbian* is unrealistic given the social contexts of the word. It can be difficult to find explicitly referenced lesbians in history because some scholars “debated whether the word lesbian could be applied to anyone who lived before the word entered popular usage. [For example,] if Lady X, in history, did not call herself a lesbian, then a scholar working in the year 1990 should not refer to her as such.”<sup>3</sup> “The sexologists' creation of the category "lesbian" began in the 1870s, simultaneously ... with the opening of possibilities of economic and social independence for women,” so any expectation to find that distinction in traditional texts is for naught.<sup>4</sup> What I have realized from this literature review is that there is no “right” way to be a lesbian, but that there are reasonable

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<sup>3</sup>Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Trisha Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians: Independent Womanhood in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 245.

markers for naming one in history. After all, “there can never be a fixed description of what it means to be a lesbian,” but that does not stop writers from trying.<sup>5</sup>

In chapter one of *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985*, the Lesbian History Group tasks themselves with trying to find a working definition for *lesbian*. Adrienne Rich, a lesbian poet and author, proposes that “all women are included within a lesbian continuum, ranging from those who may be in relationships with men but have emotional ties to other women to those with a full emotional, sexual and political commitment to women.”<sup>6</sup> Leila J. Rupp, author of *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*, also provides several tentative definitions for *lesbian* by claiming that they include “diverse manifestations of women and ‘social males’ with women’s bodies who desired, loved, made love to, formed relationships with, and married other women,” but also that “most romantic friends ‘probably did not have sexual relationships.’”<sup>7</sup>

In conversation with Annamarie Jagose’s *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, the working definitions of *lesbian* prioritize genital contact between women, although she offers no distinct definition. As an oppositional definition, the Lesbian History Group claims that the term *lesbian* does not rely on a woman’s sexual practice, but rather on “a mode of life in which a woman’s political, intellectual, emotional, social and sexual energies are focused on other women”.<sup>8</sup> This subtly coincides with Franzen’s assertion that “within every strong female network, in educational institutions, political groups, and social organizations of this period, were female couples who formed lifelong partnerships and who might, if they were of the current generation,

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<sup>5</sup> Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985* (London: The Women’s Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase*, 7.

call themselves lesbians”<sup>9</sup>. For the purposes of creating an exclusively lesbian space, I define *lesbian* as one which coincides with the exclusive emotional intimacy, erotic desires, and romantic alignment between women—a lifestyle that disallows for romantic relationships with men.

### Gendered Transgressions

An incontestable trend amongst all these sources is that lesbianism and lesbian self-identification is usually tinged with dehumanizing, oppressive, or otherwise demeaning language when described. According to Bonnie J. Morris and others she has co-opted, *lesbian* as an identity is tantamount to an insult because of its implications and associations with being man-hating, ugly, and aggressive in political ideology and advocacy. Such definitively *lesbian* traits, as Morris describes, include

the aging “flannel shirt lesbian” stereotype [which] signifies: a person who symbolizes folk guitar at festivals-in-the-woods; politically correct potlucks attended by crystal-wearing numerologists in Birkenstocks and bilevel haircuts. These images are all white, as well as derisive ... For better or for worse, the stereotype of the angry radical lesbian marching with fist raised against the patriarchy.<sup>10</sup>

The Radicalesbians provide additional insight to this in “The Woman-Identified Woman” manifesto, writing that “any woman who was successful, independent, not orienting her whole life about a man, would hear [the word *lesbian*];” while these traits are not inherently negative, they contradict the woman’s role within the patriarchy making her an outcast or degenerate in

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<sup>9</sup> Trisha Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians*, 245.

<sup>10</sup> Bonnie Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 17.

some way.<sup>11</sup> Between stereotype and broad generalizations of undesirable female behaviors, the social detriments of *lesbian* have become cemented, presenting and affirming the label as a negative.

In addition to stereotypes and name-calling, the gendered implications that affect the validity of lesbianism are of particular interest to me because of the wide range of dispositions. In my study of historical representations of Western lesbians, another trend is how frequently womanhood in the patriarchy is brought into the discussion. Due to their proximity to womanhood, not necessarily femininity, lesbians are still held to the same standards as all other women within the patriarchy. As expressed in “The History of the Idea of the Lesbian as a Kind of Person,” Nan Alamilla Boyd concludes that “the content or meanings attached to that idea [of lesbianism] have changed over time and place so that sometimes *lesbian* also means gender transgression (as in the sexological phrase “sexual inversion”).”<sup>12</sup> Tomboys, butch lesbians, and other gender nonconforming people are punished by those same expectations, and, consequently, hoisted into the same dismissive camp. Because sexism is so pervasive in Western society, it becomes more difficult to address the various ways lesbians diverge from heterosexual women in behavior, culture, and identity. This idea is captured effectively here:

To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, [the lesbian] can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her - in which case she cannot accept herself - and

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<sup>11</sup> Radicalesbians. *The Woman Identified Woman Manifesto* (New York: 1970), 2.

<sup>12</sup>Nan Alamilla Boyd, “The History of the Idea of the Lesbian as a Kind of Person.” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (June 2013): 363. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A350577330&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=ken1>

coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so.<sup>13</sup>

If women who reject patriarchal values and expectations are put into the same category as women who love, pursue, and have relations with women, how can one produce a comprehensive and exhaustive definition of *lesbian*?

Gender roles and sexism have the potential to complicate the process of self-identifying as a lesbian as well due to rigidly defined expectations. Minnie Bruce Pratt describes in “Gender Quiz” that she was “definitively lesbian to [her]self, but not in a way recognizable to a heterosexual world that assumes lesbians to be "mannish" ... But unless I "butch up" my style, sometimes I am suspect inside my lesbian world as too feminine to be lesbian.”<sup>14</sup> English poet Radclyffe Hall is a notable example of a woman who goes against the grain of societal expectations but falls in line with the wide assumptions of what a lesbian likely looks like. Katrina Rolley details the extent of Hall’s ‘gender transgressions’ by noting that she “wore a beautifully cut man's dinner jacket and skirt, a stiff shirt and bow tie ... she had her long hair cut, but she then chose to have it 'Eton cropped', a “far shorter and more 'masculine' style” than other women of the time.<sup>15</sup> This is interesting because Hall is also presumed to be a lesbian based on her women-oriented lifestyle and published lesbian fiction, but it provides support for the

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<sup>13</sup> Radicalesbians, *The Woman Identified Woman Manifesto*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, “Gender Quiz,” in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric*, eds. Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 433.

<sup>15</sup> Katrina Rolley, “Cutting a Dash: The Dress of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge,” *Feminist Review*, no. 35 (Summer, 1990): 57-58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395400>

stereotypes that lesbians are more masculine—even if it is not always the case. Nonetheless, Hall and others who engaged in transvestitism were social pariahs due to their choices of dress.

By reiterating misogynistic accusations of a misbehaved woman and associating that with lesbianism (despite attraction to women), it makes the subversive claim that women do indeed have designated roles and that deviation from them are punishable by association. Gender roles play a large part in the language used to refer to lesbians, as for example

In the pre-Liberation forties, fifties, and sixties, “Lesbian slang” was often role related. *Dyke/dike* and *butch* were used to signify “masculine” Lesbians who wore “men’s clothing” (Stanley, June 24, 1977; Aldrich 1955:54). “Feminine” Lesbians were *femmes* or *fluffs* (Vice Versa 1:6, November 1947). Among Midwest Black Lesbians the words *stud* and *fish* were used respectively (Sawyer 1965). Special terms indicating varying degrees of “mannishness” were formed by adding prefixes, for example: *bull-dyke*, *diesel dyke*, *stompin’ diesel dyke*.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their perceived sexual and romantic misnomers, *femmes* are received better by the mainstream public because they are lesbians who do not stray too far from their designated roles; they are still performing their roles as women in physical expressions. Women who refuse are considered more of a threat to social norms.

For example, as the Radicalesbians mention, “dyke is a different kind of put-down from ‘faggot,’ although both imply you are not playing your socially assigned sex role ... are not therefore a ‘real woman’ or a ‘real man.’”<sup>17</sup> Lesbian identity is often conflated with

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<sup>16</sup> J.R. Roberts, “In America, They Call Us Dykes: Notes on the Etymology and Usage of ‘Dyke,’” *Sinister Wisdom* (1979): 3.

<sup>17</sup> Radicalesbians, *The Woman Identified Woman Manifesto*, 2.

transgenderism or transvestitism, but both of those are separate and unfounded associations. Gender expression is often misinterpreted as an indication of sexuality, but there are several reasons for androgyny or other types of gender nonconformity as Rupp illustrates here:

we know about women in societies with a more flexible eye for gender primarily because outsiders observed and disapproved of [cross-dressing] behavior. What we do not know is whether women secretly became men solely for the economic and social freedom that male dress and employment could provide, whether women who openly crossed gender lines did so for economic or spiritual reasons, whether sexual motivation figured into any of these decisions, or whether some of these women conceived of themselves as something akin to transgendered, even if no such concept existed.<sup>18</sup>

Her speculation is limited because these choices are contingent on individual discretion and cannot be broadly described with accuracy due to heavy subjectivity. Nonetheless, as Rupp emphasizes, “of course not all women who crossed the gender lines desired other women.”<sup>19</sup> Yet and still, having “an understanding of contemporary fashionable and acceptable dress, as the mean against which any deviation is measured, is obviously vital to an interpretation of 'lesbian' style.”<sup>20</sup> When women commit gendered ‘transgressions,’ those misnomers can usually be defined as embracing masculinity in various ways; for example, having an assertive, dominant, or otherwise aggressive temperament, having a career or financial independence, or going unmarried has nothing to do with sexuality, but many people follow the groupthink that lazily

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<sup>18</sup> Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Rolley, “Cutting a Dash,” 56.

categorizes everything *othered* as strokes of lesbianism. While these gendered transgressions are on one end of the spectrum of generalizations, the oversexualization of lesbians lies on the other.

### **Romantic Love and Friendships**

In the previous portions of this literature review, I have noted how inconsistent proposed definitions and connotations of lesbians can be. To reiterate, my personal definition of *lesbian* is one that “coincides with the exclusive emotional intimacy, erotic desires, and romantic alignment between women—a lifestyle that disallows for romantic relationships with men. In that definition, I considered the core aspects of relationships. It took the perusal of almost all of my sources to encounter one that definitively addressed the romantic proclivities between women.

Lillian Faderman proposes a tentative definition that places emphasis on emotionality between women. Faderman writes about her findings in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, claiming that,

These romantic friendships were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital, since women in centuries other than ours often internalized the view of females as having little sexual passion. Thus, they might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness, and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit ... But whether or not these relationships had a genital component, the novels and diaries and correspondence of these periods consistently showed romantic friends opening their souls to each other and speaking a language that was in no way different from the language of heterosexual love:

They pledged to remain "faithful" forever, to be in "each other's thoughts constantly," to live together and even to die together".<sup>21</sup>

By venturing into the perceived emotional capacities of these correspondences between women, Faderman takes a different approach than the aforementioned critics. Another scholar who distances from the determination to label everything as *lesbian* is Trisha Franzen, who says,

Although the phrase "Boston Marriage," a nineteenth-century term for the relationship of two unmarried women, suggests that these partnerships were substitutes for or somehow parallel to traditional matrimony, these women's own writings suggest that among these female couples visions of their relationships placed them at a critical tension with heterosexual marriages. ... These relationships need to be analyzed not as deficient or quasimarrriages, but unique and creative couplings.<sup>22</sup>

Each of these perspectives helps to contextualize the various nuances of identifying lesbian histories and of aptly differentiating relationships amongst women. In fact, this acknowledgment of nuance gives way to questions Faderman had regarding the anticipation of homophobia, claiming that "if [she] had really uncovered a lesbian relationship, why could [she] not find any evidence of the guilt and anxiety, the need to keep secrets from family and friends, that [she] thought [was] inevitably associated with homosexuality before the days of gay

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<sup>21</sup>Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1981), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians*, 252.

liberation.”<sup>23</sup> This is reminiscent of the grievances I documented while going through my sources; from this, I conclude that the shame surrounding lesbianism must have been generated and gained traction in the twentieth century.

While there is a stigma around lesbianism, women who engage men and women romantically seem to report less incidents of backlash and experiencing oppression. Faderman intuitively identifies lesbianism by another name, documenting, “in various times and places in the nineteenth century, there were common terms to describe love relationships between women, such as “the love of kindred spirits,” “Boston marriage,” and “sentimental friends” in her quest to unveil lesbianism in fictional and biographical texts.<sup>24</sup> In revealing how lesbianism might have been referenced beyond direct language, Faderman grants insight into a deeper method of study. With new phrases to research, I came across Trisha Franzen’s *Spinsters and Lesbians: Independent Womanhood in the United States*, which documents and identifies women’s lifestyles beyond the realm of heteronormative womanhood. I also discovered Rothblum and Brehony’s “Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians,” which compiles interviews and stories of single women who live together; Rothblum and Brehony’s work also raises the question of whether a couple are still considered lovers even if they do not engage in sex.

During my brief venture into Boston marriages, I realized that the quip “they seem like such good friends” when describing lesbian relationships does not necessarily have its foundations in malicious homophobia, but rather total oblivion to the emotional capacities of women. In modern lesbian discourse, the assumption that two women who are clearly a couple

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<sup>23</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 16.

are “just very good friends” is a running joke. In the various testimonials Rothblum and Brehony compiled, I realized that these nonsexual relationships “afforded a woman companionship, nurturance, a communion of kindred spirits, romance (and undoubtedly, in some but not all such relationships, sex) all the advantages of having a ‘significant other’ in one's life and none of the burdens that were concomitant with heterosexuality, which would have made [their lives] as a pioneering career [women] impossible.”<sup>25</sup> Rothblum and Brehony presented several stories of women coupled in Boston marriages that represented what (to me) is a healthy relationship that prioritizes the other person and relies on them; Rothblum and Brehony and Franzen’s work complement one another because Franzen offers her findings after studying Boston marriages, but Rothblum and Brehony shares the personal stories of women broadcasting their experiences.

The romantic aspect of these relationships may be contested based on subjective definitions of *romantic*, but overall, Rothblum and Brehony concluded that “romantic friendship with another female could supply those needs and ... was also presumed to be innocent and harmless. It was considered no threat to a young woman's virginity (which was generally deemed to be of great value), and it kept her out of trouble until her marriage.”<sup>26</sup> Because it was generally operating under the heteronormative radar, Franzen states that it “seems more likely that [some of] these political and socially active women made pragmatic rather than psychologically based choices, recognizing the sound strategy of strength in numbers as well as finding that only in autonomous women’s organizations could they, as women, have independence and assume leadership.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Franzen continues to say that “unlike

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<sup>25</sup> Esther Rothblum and Kathleen Brehony, *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>26</sup> Rothblum and Brehony, *Boston Marriages*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians*, 237.

marriages ... these relationships allowed women to enjoy the benefits of companionship and intimacy without a conflicted separation from their female communities of support.”<sup>28</sup>

After discovering that romantic friends exist in a separate context from other lesbian discourse, I grew frustrated. How is it that I’m further from accurately defining *lesbian* than I was before? With this new roadblock, I decided to reconceptualize my research again, this time focusing on the several ways perceived lesbians are referenced, who is calling them what, and in which context.

### **Terminology and Reception in Lesbian History**

In the process of doing my research, it has become clear that identifying and defining *lesbian* is a highly contested topic of debate. While some focus on prioritizing genital contact, gender expression, sexual endeavors, and in some cases the intimate friendships between women, the authors and scholars I’ve encountered muddy the topic rather than providing clarity. What I’ve found to be even more surprising is that scholars cannot seem to agree on which terms are acceptable for the community and which are offensive, outdated slurs.

One of the phrases that has been contested is the idea of the lesbian as a *sexual invert*. In what can be perceived as homophobic and oppressive terms, many scholars and lesbian theorists accept “male sexologists’ invention of the term ‘lesbian’ to describe the ‘problem’ of women’s love for and sufficiency with each other” and it eventually became synonymous with “a label describing social-sexual abnormality and psychological ‘inversion.’”<sup>29</sup> There have been several

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<sup>28</sup> Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians*, 246.

<sup>29</sup> Kay Turner, *Between Us: A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), 17.

instances of reclaiming words that once had been detrimentally offensive; Radclyffe Hall is one of the early examples of reclaiming oppressive identifiers. Hall self-identified as a “congenital invert” and behaved in manners comparable to current links with lesbian identity, and she seemed to thrive in that alternative lifestyle. As Katrina Rolley references Newton in “Cutting a Dash: The Dress of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge,”

'congenital inverts' were 'inter-sex' and possessed 'some approximation to the masculine attitude and temperament' [while] 'Pseudo inverts' were, on the other hand, 'womanly women', 'the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by, [who] so far as they may be said to constitute a class, . . . seem to possess a genuine, though not precisely sexual, preference for women over men'.<sup>30</sup>

Amongst Jagose, Rupp, Rich, Faderman, and others, I have encountered derisive phrases such as “sexual deviation,” “sexual aberrancy,” “sexual inversion,” and “female perversion” to describe lesbians, borrowed from male scientists and sexologists. While it is important to understand the origins of dominant ideas and to credit those who generated them, I want to focus more on how lesbians refer to themselves amidst lesbian discourse.

*Dyke* is the most widely recognizable slang term to denote lesbians, but its history has not always been so warmly embraced; this is because “slang terms often originate among special groups, some of which are ‘outcasts’ from mainstream society whose members feel alienated from the values of the dominant culture.”<sup>31</sup> According to JR Roberts,

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<sup>30</sup> Rolley, “Cutting a Dash,” 54.

<sup>31</sup> Roberts, “In America, They Call Us Dykes,” 71.

in the United States, *dyke* is a cross-cultural term found in both Anglo-American and African-American slang. In African-American slang, *dyke*, as it stands alone, does not seem to have been in widespread use as of 1970, but more commonly appeared in combination with *bull* to form *bull-dyke*, signifying an “aggressive female homosexual,” *bull-dagger*, *boon-dagger*, and *bull-diker* being variations. *Bull* was/is used in Black culture to indicate Lesbian (Major 1970; Berry 1972).<sup>32</sup>

This information is not intended to normalize the widespread use of *dyke* outside the lesbian community or to assure others that it is acceptable to everyone; perception is and likely will be on an individual basis. Nonetheless, I found this story enlightening and feel that many may have similar stories:

To me *dyke* is positive; it means a strong, independent Lesbian who can take care of herself ... It signified woman-identified culture, identity, pride and strength — women, alone and together, who live consciously and deliberately autonomous lives, no longer seeking definitions or approvals according to male values.<sup>33</sup>

Despite reclamations of the word, its history is still pejorative. As Roberts continues to reveal, there is a possibility that “the word *dyke* may have had its origins in the Greek word *dike*, that is Athene, the “manly-woman” who is the principle of total order” but also the hypothesis that “*dike* probably came from hermaphrodite, the -dite being “clipped” off and later evolving

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<sup>32</sup> Roberts, “In America, They Call Us Dykes.” 71.

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, “In America, They Call Us Dykes,” 73.

into *dike*, due to a regional ([presumably] Coney Island) mispronunciation.”<sup>34</sup> Morris provides an interesting additional perspective, claiming that

Lesbian—with its roots in the identity of Sappho, from Lesbos in the Greek islands—is problematic as a Western term ... for many women of color, the term lesbian continues to signal a text-based, white (European) heritage—not the lived experience of women whose cultures lie in the global South or East ... In American culture alone, writers from Judy Grahn to Angela Davis have explored this important dynamic of language, addressing the many-layered meanings behind cultural terms such as bulldyke, bulldagger, butch, tortillera, *mujer macho*, and cautioning against an all-white projection of woman-loving’s history.<sup>35</sup>

There is no clear cut, definitive language that is applicable and warmly received by everyone. As evidenced in my research, there’s very little unity in the understandings of the queer community, and even less so amongst lesbians in particular.

According to Merrill Perlman writing for the *Colombia Journalism Review*, “*Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fifth Edition* ... lists “queer” this way: “[*Slang*] homosexual: in general usage, still chiefly a slang term of contempt or derision, but lately used as by some academics and homosexual activists as a descriptive term without negative connotations.”<sup>36</sup> This is one of the most modern definitions as that version of the dictionary was published in June 2020. However, the newer generation of LGBT youths have used it in a subversive way because

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<sup>34</sup> Roberts, “In America, They Call Us Dykes,” 4.

<sup>35</sup> Morris, *Disappearing L*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Merrill Perlman, “How the Word ‘Queer’ Was Adopted by The LGBTQ Community,” *Colombia Journalism Review*, last modified 2019, [https://www.cjr.org/language\\_corner/queer.php](https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/queer.php).

“by co-opting the word ‘queer’ ... they have disarmed homophobes.”<sup>37</sup> This is reminiscent of how Morris and Roberts discussed the evolution of lesbian-specific terms. With consideration of the ebb and flow of language, its slurs and reclamations, identifying the trajectory of lesbian-specific names sheds more light on the inconsistencies of the community.

### **Creating an Online Community**

Because of my intentions of creating a domain specifically for lesbian interaction, a space that would ideally promote the freedom to share and normalize various lesbian experiences, I had to contextualize my idea through research. There are more than a few safe spaces for lesbians on the Internet, including Lesbian Herstory Archives, GLSEN forums, and the sub-Reddit entitled “Actual Lesbians.” Why should I create my own safe space to invite these women to if others exist?

As evidenced in the bulk of my literature review, lesbians have to search a lot harder to find safe spaces made exclusively for them—not hidden amidst inclusively *queer* spaces, or subverted in feminist spaces, or any other subcategory of a dominant space. In my research, I have had to sift through a slew of pornographic images when searching for the *lesbian* hashtag on sites like Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and Reddit. I have come across queer discourse when searching for lesbian content and encountered a lot of speculation and denigration about lesbians from those outside the community. These collective experiences led me to the conclusion that there needs to be an easily accessible space that exists solely for lesbians to interrogate feelings about compulsory heterosexuality (unique to lesbians) and navigating a lifestyle that decenters

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<sup>37</sup> Perlman, “How the Word ‘Queer’ Was Adopted by The LGBTQ Community.”

heteronormativity. People who do not identify as lesbian have a different experience than lesbians do, and I want to make this space for them.

In fact, even the sub-Reddit “Actual Lesbians” is not a space exclusively for lesbians, as their tag reads: “A place for discussions for and by cis and trans lesbians, bisexual girls, chicks who like chicks, bi-curious folks, dykes, butches, femmes, girls who kiss girls, birls, bois, aces, LGBT allies, and anyone else interested.” This is something I find across many lesbian-centric spaces—they are not exclusive. To some degree, people take issue with the exclusivity of such a label, but lesbianism exists as a separate identity *because* it is the only sexuality with no affinity toward men. By virtue of that (sometimes) alienating experience alone, lesbians cannot be associated with other “girls who kiss girls” because that sexual or romantic experience is not enough to constitute the identity. *Lesbian* has been diluted to be considered a blanket term, which obscures and erases the lived experiences of an entire group of people. I have seen the ignorant remarks that lesbianism can include attraction to men, or that bisexual lesbians exist. This persistent narrative is one of my major reasons for wanting to create an exclusively lesbian space; I want to leave no room for the story to be rewritten or silenced any longer. As far as I am concerned, the exclusivity is the point.

According to Julie Brownlie in her piece entitled “Looking Out For Each Other Online: Digital Outreach, Emotional Surveillance, And Safe(r) Spaces,” we should challenge ourselves to have “an understanding of space as not innate but constituted and reconstituted through our

actions and interpretations is longstanding has been applied to online settings.”<sup>38</sup> That considered, I shall reiterate that I do not want to make a space that is punitively exclusive, but rather one that promotes visibility for a community that is often silenced. Lesbians can sometimes be buried in unscholarly discourses on social media and accused of oppressing or invalidating bisexual, trans, and other women-identified women for wanting separate spaces. I stand by my decision to limit inclusion to those who self-identify as *lesbian* and not just women who also romantically engage with women; there are numerous other dedicated spaces for them.

The next question concerns how I can ethically approach this exclusively lesbian domain with attention to the safety of others, the preservation of integrity, and the distinction from these other spaces. When dealing with online digital spaces, one risks the “wrong” people gaining access, thus increasing the potential of harm. Sexuality is a sensitive subject that should be handled delicately, in judgement-free zones. This is why I intend to create a safe space for these conversations and shared experiences to thrive. Brownlie claims that

all users of such spaces are embodied and embedded in particular places (Hines, 2015) and because online spaces have socio-material consequences ... space – online or otherwise – is constituted through, but also shapes, social relations (Lefebvre, 1991): it can keep people in (their) place or help them move.<sup>39</sup>

I want to help lesbians move into a space of their own.

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<sup>38</sup> Julie Brownlie, “Looking out for Each Other Online: Digital Outreach, Emotional Surveillance and Safe(r) Spaces,” *Emotion Space and Society*, 27, (May 2018): 61, EBSCOhost, doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2018.02.001.

<sup>39</sup> Brownlie, “Looking out for Each Other Online,” 61.

However, “safe spaces are ‘imaginary construction[s]’ ... that involve complex boundary work in relation to the imagined ‘unsafe,’” and in this context, these unsafe constructions involve people intending to out, exploit, or diminish whatever content is shared or posted.<sup>40</sup> In creating this domain, I will have to remain cognizant of the limitations of boundary setting in relation to who has access. There is no way to restrict non-lesbians from contributing their content, but I suppose it will function on an honor system of maintaining the exclusivity. As mentioned before, definitively *lesbian* spaces tend to become overpopulated with women-aligned women who do not identify as lesbian because they feel they are just as entitled. This, I believe, contributes massively to lesbian erasure on account of being categorized into the *queer* group that muddies specific identities.

Brownlie effectively contextualizes the benefits and consequences of a safe space here:

Discourses about ‘safety’ in relation to mental health, race, class or sexuality (Haber, 2016), for instance, are sometimes framed around the exclusion of others and, at other times, through inclusion – for instance, the idea of a safe space for all. The idea of being ‘safe to’ express oneself, without repercussion and perhaps in contestation of dominant discourses, is core to the creation of a space as safe but cannot always be separated from the idea of being ‘safe from’. This speaks to a long history of the public sphere as a space of surveillance and exclusion but also, especially for marginalised groups, as a space of radical potential, a ‘haven’ away from the oppressions of the private sphere (Haber, 2016). Online spaces, because of their relative anonymity and ease of access, have been seen as

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<sup>40</sup> Brownlie, “Looking out for Each Other Online,” 61.

potentially offering increased access to safe(r) spaces, though these same features can also increase the risk of feeling unsafe.<sup>41</sup>

In this breakdown, Brownlie provides insight to the potential of this exclusive safe space. Nonetheless, I still hope to foster a sense of community and to promote the validity and well-being of lesbians.

In my efforts to research lesbian communities and lifestyles, I have consumed a number of media including documentaries, television shows, movies, literature, and social media contributions. I watched the Netflix documentary entitled *A Secret Love* which told the stories of a lesbian couple who had been together for nearly seventy years, and only came out to their families in their old age. *A Secret Love* details the various means of censorship, evasion, and forced privacy these women endured to protect themselves amongst an (evolving) homophobic society that put them in danger in the risk of showing affection or revealing their relationship. Even after some speculation, they denied their romantic relationship for the sake of protecting one another; one of the women said she always denied it amongst trusted family members because she was “nervous to tell her since she didn’t want to lose her love.”<sup>42</sup>

When they became more emboldened in their romantic expressions, they were still cautious because of the potential harm. Toward the end of the documentary, the couple recovered some old letters—the bottom half of every letter had been ripped off where they had signed it to one another to avoid any possibility of it being traced. This was significant to me because not even their private, sentimental letters went untouched by the threat of homophobic backlash. My

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<sup>41</sup> Brownlie, “Looking out for Each Other Online,” 62.

<sup>42</sup> *A Secret Love*. Directed by Chris Bolan (Netflix, 2020), documentary.

heart ached through much of the documentary because I thought about how lonely it must have been. These women had no sense of community or a safe space to express themselves beyond the confines of their respective homes. Of course, they lived in a different social context, but I couldn't help thinking about the various lesbians who live in rural, undeveloped, religious, or otherwise unsafe environments who might benefit from an online community explicitly dedicated to their identity.

I also watched a documentary on Showtime called *L Word in Mississippi: Hate the Sin* that detailed the struggles of lesbians who lived in the Bible Belt. These women found community in numerous ways including found families, intimate relationships, and seeking personal validation when faced with ostracization from their neighborhood communities. When these women are surrounded by hateful messages that accuse them of their “minds not functioning,” of going to hell and being “deranged,” and someone akin to “bestiality,” I understand how the rampant internalized homophobia can become ingrained.<sup>43</sup> It was a horrifying thing to witness people wholeheartedly claiming that “when God doesn't take the gay away, kids kill themselves,” fully ignoring how hateful speech, a lack of resources, and a lack of community massively contributes to the suicide rates amongst gay youths.<sup>44</sup>

This is where the importance of the found family becomes paramount. Many of these out lesbians have been disowned or ostracized from their families, churches, friends, and broader community; instead of begging for inclusion, they created their own families and found refuge in a community of their own. Of course, it would be ideal to be accepted and loved unconditionally by one's family, but when that isn't the case, “that's what the other family is there for, to

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<sup>43</sup>*L Word in Mississippi: Hate the Sin*, Directed by Lauren Lazin (Showtime, 2014), documentary.

<sup>44</sup> *L Word in Mississippi: Hate the Sin*.

support.”<sup>45</sup> Again, I wonder what an online community like the one I hope to create might have offered them; I doubt it would have changed the outcome of their situation, but perhaps it could have provided an avenue to easily talk to people who had been through similar things. They did well finding and building these communities on their own, but I also think more of a far-reaching system could have boosted the participation.

For people who are bound to their towns and cities, but are still seeking community, I want this domain to act as a beacon for their yearning. I remember what it was like to feel alone (whether this is due to being the only *out* person, everyone else being taken, or facing homophobia) and I hope to provide the resources I lacked when I was questioning my sexuality.

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<sup>45</sup> *L Word in Mississippi: Hate the Sin.*

## Reflective Essay

The Vast Unsaid began as a Capstone requirement, but it has undoubtedly developed into a passion project of mine. My research was extremely personal to me because it is so intrinsic to my identity and how I navigate the world. Here, I want to explain the process of creating this website and launching my associated open mic event. I will explain the shifts my project has taken, the trials and tribulations of learning code, and the course of creating and hosting an event.

Initially, my capstone was going to be a simple research paper. Inspired by a final paper of my Feminist Rhetorics class, I wanted to do a study of lesbian letters. My intentions in choosing that topic were to shed light on how lesbian writing has been consciously and subconsciously affected by heteronormativity and patriarchy. I discovered that those letters shared some central themes: ambiguity, a hesitancy to identify as a *lesbian*, the endorsement of lesbian stereotype, adjacency to men in their same-sex revelations, the full, reckless abandon when falling in love, and intentional resistance and rejection of imposed forces. I took some speculative liberties with my critical imagination and concluded that those themes were likely the result of internalized homophobia and/or compulsive heterosexuality as imposed by the patriarchy. To reach those conclusions, I used contextual clues from the era these letters were compiled in to supplement societal perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community in respect to the letters; I also analyzed these texts through rhetorical listening. I had planned to use that paper as a framework for my capstone project, but soon realized the fundamental lack of lesbian archival materials.

In September, I finished crafting my capstone bibliography of what I thought would be methods to assess those lesbian artifacts I had not yet collected. Soon after, I started looking for the materials I would study; I had a niche focus on lesbian love letters, but I was open to journal

entries, cards, notes, and poetry. I quickly realized how scarce romantic lesbian artifacts were in the public domain. I broadened my search to simply lesbian artifacts, dropping the romantic requirement. I searched library archives, the web, and sought out personal collections from close individuals, but often failed to discover or solicit those materials for my study. I wondered, where are the lesbian artifacts? I know they must exist, so why can't I find them?

Although the Lesbian Herstory Archives is a tremendous resource, there was no way for me to get to New York for my research. Their archives are mostly inaccessible online, and what they had available did not align with my vision for my project. I struggled through social media to find accounts dedicated to lesbian history, but I mostly discovered lesbian activists, associations, and academic papers or political strategies—still, this was not what I was looking for. I did not want to compromise the integrity of my project to acquiesce to what was available to me; my drive for unearthing and studying romantic lesbian composition was only amplified.

Around November, I made the decision to create the space I was struggling to find. Colloquially and socially, lesbians are considered to be one of the most romantic groups (within queer discourse) associated with writing poetry, planning elaborate dates, and making meaningful gestures to woo their partners. In my personal experience I know this to be true, and I also knew that there was a “market” for this. The Vast Unsaid was conceptualized, although untitled at the time, to be a space for lesbian celebration.

### **Creating the Website**

I did a lot of background work for my capstone over Christmas break including researching domains, reading sources about privacy, and searching for queer organizations that might be able to help me spread the word about my project. Dr. Rorabaugh shared with me

various insights on the best way to maintain ethos for my project. I initially suggested making a specific page on my personal website, which is owned by Squarespace, and he suggested that I make this domain from scratch so that I am the sole owner. That way, I have more agency with my submissions and more trust from my contributors. I took his suggestion and it turned out to be the best decision for me because there are no ads or external administrators on my site. I researched the hosting sites GoDaddy, BlueHost, and Reclaim Hosting before settling on Reclaim Hosting. I downloaded WordPress onto the domain and started to learn coding from YouTube tutorials and adjacent Google searches. This learning curve was the most difficult (and frustrating!) part of my capstone project, but I eventually understood the intricacies of coding. I have now independently created a product I am proud of.

### **What's In a Name?**

It took me about two months to select a name for the website. I had considered calling it the Les Be Heard Collective, HEaRd Collective, Our Lesbian Story, Lavender Menace, and other witty names before choosing The Vast Unsaid. Ultimately, I decided to rely on my roots and chose a name that was reminiscent of my initial paper from *Feminist Rhetorics*. I used the compiled archive of letters in Kay Turner's "Between Us: A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters" to analyze. One of my favorite excerpts read: "... My dear dear Tiny Heart, why shouldn't you have all the love that ... I can give you? And don't get frightened over the little we can express—Think of the vast unsaid." – Jane, 1909 (Turner 42). I thought it was lovely and suited for my site of lesbian celebration since this is a group that is continually erased and silenced. It so simply delivered everything I was trying to wring from the lesbian imagery before. With Jane's gentle, ambiguous suggestion to "think of the vast unsaid," I knew I had found my title. I

am thinking of the vast unsaid now, and I'm encouraging us to say more. The next part of my ambitious plan was to solicit submissions from self-identified lesbians.

### **Developing Community**

I knew that I wanted my website to be representative of a larger community effort to prioritize lesbian visibility. Not only did I want self-identified lesbian submissions, but also promotion from lesbian, feminist, and queer organizations to help me call for submissions. When I started Capstone II, I reached out to Georgia Voice, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Southern Fried Queer Pride, Lesbian Herstory, and SONG Atlanta.

I received an email reply from the New York-based Lesbian Herstory Archives declining collaboration to my project on the basis of its exclusivity. I found it interesting that their reason for declining was the very reason I was inspired to create the website. Their email reads:

“Dear Kara.

Thanks for your inquiry. It's clear that it is a subject you hold dear and have thought a lot about.

Yes, you are correct in your observation that it differs from our practices. We are a Lesbian Archive and we aim to preserve all lesbian materials, without excluding any particular group or approach. It is our goal to preserve the voices we have lost- without exclusion.

That means that we cannot collaborate on a project as you describe. But our collections and holdings themselves will hold evidence of all, including the type of materials, expressions and voices that you yourself feel deeply about. We wish you the best of luck with your project.

On behalf of LHA,

Saskia”

This inspired me to follow up on their mission statement. Their information on their about page states that “The Archives welcomes all to come visit, explore the collections and do research ... Gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion or dis/ability will never be barriers for use of the Archives collection.” This approach decenters their claim of lesbian representation because they are using it as a blanket term indicative of a broad group of queer women. This is what I’m trying to avoid in my project. This rejection invigorated my quest for an authentic lesbian-centric space, and it also revealed the ways I needed to strengthen my rhetorical strategy for the project.

When one door closes, another opens. While Lesbian Herstory Archives decided against me, Southern Fried Queer Pride (SFQP) offered to help me organize an event to garner interest and participation for my project. I spoke with Taylor from SFQP about producing a 2-day in-person and Zoom event. Taylor then put me in contact with a team of web designers, social media managers, artists, and event planners to bring my vision to life. We decided to schedule the event for April 5, 2022, from 7-9 PM. As it came to fruition, I had a graphic artist design my flyer and logo for the website, a social media manager sharing and reposting my site to their eighteen thousand followers, and the event planner who secured my venue along with the equipment for free. From these collaborative efforts, *The Vast Unsaid: A Lesbian Open Mic & Meetup* was born.

The turnout was unanticipated. We hosted the event at Hodgepodge Coffeehouse in Atlanta, but the volume of the crowd surpassed the room capacity! There was standing room only, and we had to tell some guests to wait in the lobby for accessibility purposes. Due to the crowd, our open mic time slot carried on past the designated time, so some guests did not get to perform. The event was so successful that guests wanted to stay and converse all the way until

the venue's closing time; we had to shoo them out where they then happily conversed in the parking lot until 11 PM (two hours beyond the event advertisement). It fills me with glee to be responsible for such a valuable event in the lesbian community.

At the event, I received twelve new submissions for The Vast Unsaid, and even more since it ended. My Instagram page for The Vast Unsaid has soared from a struggling fifteen followers to 250. The analytics report states that my site has been viewed 3,500+ times since launching it on April 1, 2022.

### **The Vast Unsaid Site Navigation**

I had distanced myself from the emphasis on lesbian letters and instead allowed this project to evolve to an endorsement of all lesbian artifacts. The Vast Unsaid is a new digital archive to house photos, videos, screenshots, letters, cards, journal entries, art pieces, poetry, mementos, and more. The broad categories are handwritten artifacts, photos, videos, story, and art. I realized that I did not want to contribute to lesbian erasure by dictating what people can and cannot share; our materials are already difficult enough to find.

The only stipulations I have placed on contributions to The Vast Unsaid so far are on the basis of nudity. I imagine The Vast Unsaid to be a potential source of redefining the lesbian identity, distancing it from the oversexualization and political militarism associated with the label. Lesbians are oversexualized enough on average, within and outside the LGBTQ+ community. The Vast Unsaid does not endorse displays of partial or full nudity on the basis of reclaiming the lesbian narrative (however, submissions containing sexual references or recounting sexual experiences may be posted if they do not display nudity). Instead, this space has a specific focus on the identity, intimacy, love, and romantic communications of lesbians.

The mission of The Vast Unsaid is to advocate for lesbian visibility. When soliciting submissions, there is no discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sex assigned at birth. As an organization that values the celebration of lesbian identity, I only ask that contributions are made by individuals who self-identify as lesbian. As my literature review indicated, lesbians have to search a lot harder to find safe spaces made specifically for them—not hidden amidst inclusively *queer* spaces, or subverted in feminist spaces, or any other subcategory of a dominant space. People who do not identify as lesbians have a different experience than lesbians do, and I want to make this space for them.

Additionally, in my literature review I explored the discordant nature of lesbian discourse. Across the literature, lesbian scholars and theorists have not been able to settle on one cohesive definition of lesbian, so I will not attempt to do so either. According to The Lesbian History Group, "there can never be a fixed description of what it means to be a lesbian."<sup>46</sup> While I understand that a "lesbian" is generally defined as a woman with a romantic, sexual, and emotional attraction toward women, I also understand the nearsighted nature of this definition. It does not allow for the nuances of gender regarding women-aligned people, including our gender-nonconforming peers and people who were not assigned female at birth. For the purposes of The Vast Unsaid, the definition of lesbian is expansive and inclusive of all who wish to self-identify as lesbian regardless of gender identity. I do not perceive lesbian as an umbrella term, however. The Vast Unsaid was created to place an emphasis on specific *lesbian* visibility, not to cast a broad net over women who like women. The *lesbian* label is important to my mission and what I hope to accomplish.

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<sup>46</sup> Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase*, 14.

With the understanding that The Vast Unsaid amplifies self-identified lesbian voices, the site is currently presented as an ongoing feed of submissions. The homepage is organized based on the dates of the submissions and is uncategorized. Only the first image of each post is presented, but users are able to click on them to view all content and read the full transcript. Every post has associated tags and is classified into Handwritten, Photos, Videos, Story, or Art categories. There is a menu at the top of each page where users can access the homepage, categories, submission guidelines, or read about us. The “About” tab leads users to a drop-down menu of frequently asked questions. The “Submission Guidelines” tab leads users to a drop-down menu of specific types of submissions, preferred presentation of those submissions, and how to submit them.

I wanted to collect data from the self-identified lesbians who submitted, so I created a two-part submission Google form. The first part of the Google form allows users to upload a submission. The second part is an optional survey intended to record lesbian experiences. When creating this survey, I wanted to gather other opinions on my frustration with finding lesbian content. I asked questions about their lesbian identity, their experience with ostracization in queer and feminist spaces, respectively, and if there are any similar organizations or projects. Some of the questions were free response while others were simple polls. As of now, my survey only has twenty-six responses, but the answers are quite diverse. I am excited about the future of The Vast Unsaid and to see where my project may go from here.

### **Conclusion**

The creation of The Vast Unsaid is not only a refreshing development within the niche LGBTQ+ sphere, but also important to the field of American Studies. By paying homage to

dominant groups and intentionally uplifting the voices of those rendered invisible, I am contributing to this field by arguing for the validity of lesbian artifacts. With my website, I make the argument that lesbianism is a subject worthy of research, collection, and celebration. I am combatting lesbian erasure by purposefully centering definitively lesbian artifacts, thus disallowing them to be diluted by other groups or ideas. My project aligns with the interests of American Studies because it takes an interdisciplinary approach of dismantling and divorcing feminist and queer identities and realities. To reiterate what Jagose provocatively claims, “*lesbian issues* are not *feminist issues*, and therefore do not take precedence in the feminist agenda” (46). And LGBTQ+ issues are much too broad to serve lesbian interests alone, so by arguing in favor of lesbian research I am well in line with the sentiments of American Studies.

While *The Vast Unsaid* began as a requirement for my Master’s degree, I know I will take this beyond the academic sphere. The community response to my project (considering the turnout from the open mic, plus my surge of Instagram followers) supports the idea that this is an important and necessary endeavor. I am creating a space that people want to be a part of. With the end of this degree, I will focus on organizing more lesbian-centric events with SFQP (they’ve offered me a position on their team!) and honing my web-design skills. I also would like to create a forum for *The Vast Unsaid* to facilitate more community and correspondence. As I complete my capstone project, I am immensely proud of my research and my creation. It can only improve from here.

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Waite, Helen. "Old Lesbians: Gendered Histories and Persistent Challenges." *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 34, (October 2015): 8–13. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/ajag.12272.  
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Wight, J. "Queer Sweet Home: Disorientation, Tyranny, and Silence in Digital Space." *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, 14, no. 2: 128–137. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1177/1532708613512269. Accessed 11 Oct. 2021.

# Kara Ireland

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## Experience

### Teaching

- Kennesaw State University, Love and Sex (GWST 1102)
  - in-person and online
  - 2 semesters, 98% passing rate.

August 2018-May 2020

### **Kennesaw State University Writing Center, Kennesaw, GA - Writing Assistant**

- Reviews and aids the process of writing business proposals, term papers, scholarships, creative writing, and dissertations
- Ability to make confident suggestions, gentle corrections, and voice questions and concerns
- Confidence with public speaking
- Firm grasp of recent MLA, APA, CMS formatting and citation styles
- Affluence in writing ability, ranging from concise excerpts to elongated, detailed exposition

### **Panels and Roundtables**

- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, Huiel, Daisha, Ireland, Kara, Jones, Briona Simone, Story, Kaila Adia, and Valentine, Christopher. "Black Feminist Roundtable Discussion: The Masking and Unmasking of Violence Against Women and the LGBTQIA Community in the BLM Movement." (Invited) African and African Diaspora Studies Student and Research Community Engagement Virtual Conference. Kennesaw, 25 March 2021, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw GA. [Panelists' names are in alphabetical order.]
- Huiel, Daisha, Ireland, Kara, and Valentine, Christopher. "African & African Diaspora Studies in Dialogue with American Studies." African and African Diaspora Studies Student Research and Community Engagement Virtual Conference. Kennesaw, 25 March 2021, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw GA. [Panelists' names are in alphabetical order.]
- Guglielmo, Letizia, Ireland, Kara, Santos, Natalie.  
  
"Love, Sex, & Justice in the South" - SEWSA 2022 (Virtual Online). Panel Title: "Engaging, Applying, and Complicating Feminist Rhetorics in Theory and Practice." Presentation Title: "Hush Hush: Lesbian Erasure & a Rhetorical Study of Lesbian Letters." [Panelists' names are in alphabetical order.]

Panel Overview: Feminist scholars engage rhetorical theory and practice from a number of angles, including adding women and other marginalized rhetors to the rhetorical canon; expanding the scope and location of rhetorical theory, practice and space; questioning who speaks, when, where, and to or

for whom; and actively listening for silences and erasures and recovering or centering those voices, perspectives, and lived experiences. Central to these theories and practices are ways of understanding feminist rhetorics as embodied and performed. This panel engages, applies, and complicates rhetorical theory and practice from three distinct perspectives.

### **Projects and Events:**

In process:

- “The Vast Unsaid” Website and Event (Master’s Capstone project)
  - Project overview: I am studying and documenting the preservation of lesbian history with a specific focus on intimacy, love, and romantic communications between women. I intend to create a digital archive seeking to explore how self-identified lesbians establish agency, familiarity, and privacy in digital spaces. This digital archive may include a series of photos, videos, audio recordings, screenshots, art pieces, and textual submissions through email. I want to compile exclusively lesbian artifacts to create a space that celebrates the romantic aspects of lesbianism. Hence, my initial focus is on maintaining the exclusivity of this ideally self-identified lesbian-centric domain to protect the shared content, identities, and reach of the posts. This event is to help gather content submissions (April 5-April 7, 2022).

## **Education**

August 2017- May 2020

**Kennesaw State University** - *Kennesaw, GA*

- Masters of American Studies, final semester
- B.A. in English, Magna Cum Laude
- Founder of “Between the Lines” Poetry Club (Spring 2019- Fall 2021)

Classes (4.0 average maintained)

Graduate (August 2020-May 2022)

- History and Culture of the Americas (AMST 6201)
- American Studies Scholarship (AMST 7000)
- American Cities, Suburbs, & Countrysides (AMST 7300)
- America in Transnational Context (AMST 7520)
- Feminist Rhetorics (AMST 7330)
- College and University Teaching (GRAD 9001)
- Literature and Culture of the Americas (AMST 6401)
- The Workers’ Experience: The U.S. Since 1939 (AMST 7210)

Undergraduate (August 2017-May 2020)

- The Black Woman (AADS 3500)
- Issues in African Diaspora Studies (AADS 1102)
- Cultural Studies of Literature (ENGL 3330)
- Love and Sex (GWST 1102)

### **Summary of Skills**

- Interpersonal skills demonstrated by articulation and confidence in public speaking and writing abilities
- Proficiency in navigation of online resources (Slack, WordPress, D2L, and social media) and Microsoft Online Suite (Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel)
- Acute attention to detail, grammar, and formatting in academic and creative writing
- Mastery in African and African Diaspora Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Queer Studies, and Transnational Studies (satisfied by the Masters of American Studies)