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MA Gender Studies Thesis

Where are the lesbians?

A Contested Political Existence in the Spanish Arena

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Acknowledgments and dedication

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This essay is for those who once thought they were the only ones.

*“I write to record what others erase when I speak,
to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you.”*

Gloria Anzaldúa¹

“The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.”

Bonnie Zimmerman²

Introduction. *We have always been here*

In 1983, American cartoonist Alison Bechdel first published the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, one of the first representations of lesbians in pop culture. Two years later, in 1985, her comic featured an episode in which two early versions of characters Ginger and Mo discussed something designated as “The Rule”³, which soon became known as “the Bechdel test”, featuring the name of the comic creator, Alison Bechdel⁴. This rule, first understood as “a little lesbian joke in an alternative feminist newspaper” according to Bechdel herself (Morlan, 2014), soon became a feminist standard for analyzing popular culture. Its repercussions transcended the lesbian community and reached a wider audience: the one of feminist-identified individuals and

¹ Anzaldúa, 1983:169

² Zimmerman, 1984:676

³ “The Rule” (*Dykes to Watch Out For*, 1985), accounts for the ways in which women are represented in the cinematic industry. If a movie wants to “pass the test”, it must feature two (named) women, who talk with each other about something other than a man (be this man a husband, father, brother, boss, son, friend, and so on). The cartoon can be viewed in the following link: <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/The-Rule-cleaned-up.jpg>

⁴ Although a more correct naming would be the Bechdel-Wallace test, since Bechdel acknowledges her friend Liz Wallace for first coming up with the idea. Wallace’s name appears under the title of the first version of *Dyke’s to Watch Out For’s* “The Rule”.

institutions. Its popularization responded to the need of drawing attention to the problem of gender inequality and the lack of female representation in popular fiction, and it soon went beyond the lesbian scene in order to become an important feminist tool.

Even though the first formal appearance of lesbian feminism dates back to the 1970s, the first lesbian activist in history can be found as early as 1904, when Hamburg native Anna Rüling (born Theo Anna Sprüngli, Germany, 1880-1953) publicly acknowledged her sexual orientation, becoming the first known lesbian activist in the world (Neumann, 2015:1). She was prompted to participate in women's groups in order to shed light on "the dangers of forcing gay men and lesbians to conform to a straight mold", probably after suffering the consequences of forced heterosexual marriage herself (ibid). Sadly, towards the end of her life, she denounced that "[i]f we weigh all the contributions which homosexual women have made to the Women's Movement, one would be astounded that its large and influential organizations have not lifted a finger to obtain justice in the state and in society for the not so small number of its [lesbian] members..." (Rüling, as qt. ibid). In fact, "[w]hile many lesbians were active in the women's movement, [feminism] did not work for lesbian rights" (Neumann, 2015:1). However, "[t]o the shock and outrage of many of these women, Rüling defined lesbianism as a feminist challenge" (ibid).

Lesbian input to feminism strongly marked the evolution of the movement for women's emancipation. Lesbian feminist thinkers were "the first activists to raise the issue of class in the feminist movement" (hooks, 2010:3), since "[t]hey were a group of women who had not imagined they could depend on husbands to support them", and "they were often much more aware than their straight counterparts of the difficulties all women would face in the workforce" (ibid). One of the reasons that may explain why lesbians were a part of the Woman's Movement since its origins is that their positioning outside of heterosexual relationships (or their disgust while participating in them) often made them become a target for "patriarchal indoctrination"⁵, thus making them more aware than their heterosexual counterparts of the consequences of living in patriarchal⁶ societies.

⁵ With the term "patriarchal indoctrination" I wish to refer to the phenomenon of imposing heterosexuality to all individuals belonging to a same society, whether their sexuality conforms with the heterosexual ideal or not. In the following pages I further develop this idea relating it to the concept of "compulsory heterosexuality", employed by Adrienne Rich and others.

⁶ In the words of bell hooks: "Psychotherapist John Bradshaw's clear-sighted definition of patriarchy in *Creating Love* is a useful one: 'The dictionary defines 'patriarchy' as a 'social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family in both domestic and religious functions'. Patriarchy is characterized by male domination and power. He states further that 'patriarchal rules still govern most of the world's religious, school systems, and family systems'." (Bradshaw, as quoted in hooks, 2010:3).

Just like Anna Rüling was forced to marry a man and live as a heterosexual woman during an important part of her life, lesbians in history have struggled to have their identities acknowledged, respected, and represented.

One of the most pressing demands of the feminist movement in its origins was related to political participation, both as active and passive suffrage. Women wanted to vote and be voted for. They wanted to have as many political rights as men because they knew that, without this possibility, their emancipation would not be completely realized. They would be dependent on institutions and governors that were more privileged than them, and their specific problems as women would not be addressed. Women thus entered politics thanks to the work of First Wave feminists, and slowly but surely they started accounting for greater percentages of parliamentary seats. In 2008, the International Women's Democracy Center found out that 18% of parliamentary seats worldwide were occupied by women⁷. Women-focused policies around the world have been implemented, but there is virtually no data about the ones affecting lesbians. Additionally, and even though there is an increasing number of gay male politicians around the world, the number of lesbian politicians is only just starting to grow.

Elaboration of goals

Against this background, my question is where are the lesbians? If lesbians constitute such a relevant part of the feminist movement, and it was the feminist movement that brought women to power, why did it not bring lesbians to power as well? In this essay, I draw on my own experience as a lesbian woman⁸ to hypothesize that lesbians have particular political representational needs, different from the needs of gay men and heterosexual women, that need to be addressed not only by including a greater presence of lesbian parliamentarians, but also by pushing legal measures that focus on the needs of lesbian-identified individuals.

In order to demonstrate this, I structure my reasoning in four stages. First of all, I set the ground by problematizing women as a particular political class in struggle for its liberation, and I elaborate on the relationship between sexuality, patriarchy, and politics. The second part focuses on expanding the concept of patriarchal sexualities in order to analyze the question of othering of the lesbian subject. This part, core of the present work, revolves around questions such as who are the

⁷ The statistics can be found following this link: <https://iwdc.org/resources/>

⁸ In the words of Shane Phelan: "I may insist on my lesbian identity not because I believe myself to be 'really' lesbian, but because my relationship to that category (whatever that relationship may be) importantly structures my life." (Phelan, 1994-2).

lesbians and why are they object in patriarchal societies. The third section explains the reasons that motivate a study on lesbians exclusively, why feminist and queer circles cannot accurately address lesbian political needs, and I introduce the Spanish case study as a practical example of the lack of lesbian representation in politics. In the fourth part of this essay I present my findings concerning the political needs of lesbian, bisexual, pansexual women and women-identified individuals⁹ in Spain. This discussion and conclusion section will relate the literature studied with my own findings in order to produce theoretical knowledge on political lesbianism.

Disclaimer: About essentialism

Throughout this essay, and in particular in the fourth section, Adrienne Rich's definition of lesbianism, better explained by the concepts of the *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum*, will be privileged:

“I have chosen to use the terms *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum* because the word *lesbianism* has a clinical and delimiting ring. *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range — through each woman's life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.” (Rich, 1980:135, italics from the original.)

In this sense, any woman or female-identified individual who has desired or experienced romantic or sexual relationships with other female-identified subjects will be encompassed under the rubric “lesbian” for the purpose of this essay. Far from aiming to essentialize identities, my decision is grounded on the understanding that individuals who have experienced lesbophobia share a common experience and can thus be grouped inside the same social category for political purposes. Whether these individuals have also experienced heterosexual privilege is considered to be irrelevant for the purpose of this essay.

Conscious of the risks entailed by adopting an identitarian approach to this matter, Judith Butler's point on the political implications of Identitarianism may be pertinent to consider at this stage:

“[...] identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory

⁹ This essay is inclusive of all female identities in and outside the binary, including, but not limited to cisgender women, butches, femmes, transgender women, and non-binary female-identified individuals.

contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies.” (Butler, 1993:308).

In this sense, I consciously and politically adopt the term ‘lesbian’ to encompass particular individuals with similar life experiences related to their levels of oppression. These are people who have been subjected to similar discriminations due to the fact that “[h]owever we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labeled, it flickers across and distorts our lives” (Rich, 1980:139). Appearing as lesbian to the eyes of the world is already enough to suffer the consequences of an heterosexist culture.

I. THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL¹⁰

Woman, the myth

This essay is born from the necessity of creating an exclusively lesbian political study. Political science has, for the greater part of history, been marked by patriarchy,

“a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks, 2010:1).

As a result, the knowledge produced in social sciences such as political theory is oblivious of female existence, denying women their necessary space, and setting womanhood as the shadow of the white male ideal, an inexplicable Other whose existence is simply not worthy of consideration. Men rule the world and women are left a narrow space to exist, even within their own selves. Women, under this domination system, are artificially bound to put *en scène* the qualities men do not wish for themselves, to complement men, to remain at their service and perform the roles they need in particular moments (the mother, the servant, the whore...). Men appropriate masculinity and define womanhood as the radical opposite.

However, “the interests of women have nothing to do with the interests of femininity” (Pizano, 2003-1:64), since “femininity is a construction organized within masculinity and dependent upon it” (ibid)¹¹. In this sense, womanhood is a myth, a construction, a role. Being a woman is not a “natural given”, a “biological happenstance”, but a social construct and a “political

¹⁰ “The personal is political” (or “the private is political”) is a feminist slogan widely used since Second Wave Feminism, originating in the late 1960s. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly who the original author of this sentence was, it is generally attributed to Carol Hanisch, who popularized it in a 1969 essay entitled “The Personal is Political”. It is commonly employed to interrelate personal, private experiences with larger societal rules and political structures individuals are usually unaware of. Originating as a defiance to patriarchal rule operating in nuclear families in the 60s, it is employed nowadays in order to dismantle heterosexist prejudice in many social situations (i.e. street harassment, sexist education, sexual violence, abortion, and so on).

¹¹ I have translated all Margarita Pizano Fischer’s quotes from Spanish. The original reads “[...] los intereses de las mujeres no tienen nada que ver con los intereses de la feminidad”, and again, “[d]ebemos tener claro que la feminidad es una construcción organizada dentro de la masculinidad y en función de ella” (Pizano, 2003-1:64).

category” (Wittig, 1993:105) that imposes the mark of otherness on the bodies of approximately half of the individuals born on this planet, the not-men, the not-One. This construction is not in itself innocent, it has consequences:

“the cause or origin of [our] oppression is in fact only *the mark* imposed by the oppressor: ‘the myth of woman’, plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus this mark does not predate oppression [...]. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only *a sophisticated and mythic construction, an ‘imaginary formation’*, which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived.” (Wittig, 1993:104, italics added for emphasis.)

In this sense, some individuals are designated as “women” by the patriarchal culture of naming things as a way to appropriate otherness, of designating the unknown under the premise of knowing it better.

The political implications of being recognized as a woman in social situations are not left unfelt. Whether we identify gender expression as performance (Butler, 1993:314) or masquerade (Irigaray, as qt. in Holmlund, 1989:107), this mummery seems to have real life consequences for those who, voluntarily or as an imposition, appear under the sign of woman. In the words of Judith Butler, “gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (Butler, 1993:314, italics from the original). Being perceived as a woman immediately implies having to suffer the consequences of patriarchy. In this sense, performing the role of woman, whether we do it voluntarily or not, introduces one dimension of oppression that intersects with others (for instance, race and degree of ability/disability). We are faced here with “[a] *compulsory* performance, in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” (ibid:315, italics from the original). Playing the role of woman is thus an imposition and an identity-defining act, but one has to be accurate in the performance: it has to go along patriarchal lines. “[W]oman’ is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a ‘real’ one” (Wittig, 1993:104). The imperatives of femininity are all-pervasive. If one is thought to be a woman, any deviance from the feminine able-bodied ideal is ranked on a scale of monstrosity¹².

As a result, women are seen somehow as an alien group, differentiated from the male ideal and the male ways of appropriating the world. We are barely included in knowledge production —

¹² Examples of the concept of monstrosity applied to women’s femininity imperative can be found in Eva Hayward’s work (e.g. Hayward, 2008).

both as active creators and as subjects of study — because we do not create that knowledge, and because the ones who create it envision us as an uncivilized, primitive, and tamable version of themselves. Taking conscience of their role as othered subjects becomes thus an important political step to take if lesbians wish to be accounted for in a system in which they are eternal foreigners. “When we start interrogating the design they have made of us, we just start becoming acting subjects, deconstructing misogyny — with ourselves as well as others”¹³ (Pizano, 2003-1:64). If this conscience grasping is not realized, “we will only be guests, invited to a system that thinks for us, that becomes eroticized by our bodies and not our minds”¹⁴ (ibid). Hence, “we will always be a bit outside, outside of the world, outside of culture, outside of politics and outside of our bodies, easily falling into the schizophrenic processes of this society”¹⁵ (ibid). Realizing our status as women is a necessary step if we wish to be accounted for in our societies. Developing sorority towards those who suffer the same gender-based oppressions brings us one step closer to reclaiming a space in the patriarchal world. Only with this realization will women “as political and thinking subjects” no longer “remain in the shadows”¹⁶ (Pizano, 2003-1:63).

Woman, the class

One of the ways in which it may also be purposeful to think about the construction of woman is that it situates us as a gendered version of the classical Marxist class struggle. In the same way the proletariat found common problems and oppressions in their existence as belonging to the working class, women all around the world are subjected to equivalent yokes simply because they are perceived to be women in social and political settings. Monique Wittig has extensively addressed the issue:

“[...] it is our historical task, and only ours, to define what we call oppression in materialist terms, to make it evident that *women are a class*, which is to say that the category ‘woman’ as well as the category ‘man’ are *political and economic categories and not eternal ones*. Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle.

¹³ In the original: “Al interrogar el diseño que han hecho de nosotras, recién comenzamos a ser sujetos actuantes, a deconstruir la misoginia — con una misma y con las otras —.” (Pizano, 2013-1:64), own translation.

¹⁴ In the original: “Sin esta condición básica sólo seremos invitadas, convidadas a un sistema que piensa por nosotras, que se erotiza con nuestros cuerpos y no con nuestro pensamiento” (ibid), own translation.

¹⁵ In the original: “Estaremos siempre un poco fuera, fuera del mundo, fuera de la cultura, fuera de la política y fuera de nuestro cuerpo, cayendo fácilmente en los procesos esquizofrénicos de esta sociedad”, own translation.

¹⁶ The full quote in the original version is: “[I]a mujer como sujeto pensante y político permanece en las sombras” (“[w]oman, as thinking and political being, remains in the shadows”) (Pizano, 2003-1:63), own translation.

Once the class ‘men’ disappears, ‘women’ as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters.” (Wittig, 1993:106) (Italics added for emphasis.)

This introduces a new and necessary dimension to consider. On the one hand, we find “woman”, which, as I already explicated elsewhere, is nothing but a “myth” — whereas “women”, on the other hand, constitutes “the class within which we fight” for our liberation, “for ‘woman’ does not exist for us, it is only an imaginary formation, while ‘women’ is the product of a social relationship” (Wittig, 1993:106).

As a result, it is our social duty both as class in struggle and as individuals escaping mythical constructions, to acquire awareness of our status as a subjugated group in order to be able to improve it. This is something we cannot expect others to accomplish for our sake, because “what transforms society is a critical vision of the values of masculinity and its institutions, and this is a reflexion that men will not do for obvious reasons, since this is their space of power and identity”¹⁷ (Pizano, 2003-1:72). Once this will be achieved, our struggle will appear to be less insurmountable,

“[f]or once one has acknowledged oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become *someone* in spite of oppression, that one has one’s own identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since, although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself.” (Wittig, 1993:106, italics from the original.)

Realizing our status as women within patriarchal structures, and being aware of the artificiality of this category is the first necessary step to liberate ourselves from the structures that oppress us. Gaining awareness of other oppressive structures (race, economic class, levels of ability and neuronormativity, sexuality, and so on) is the next cornerstone in our struggle.

About sexuality in women (as seen by men)

What does sexuality have to do with our levels of oppression? According to Luce Irigaray, the two are strongly interrelated: “[f]emale sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (Irigaray, 1985:23). Additionally, “subjects are embedded in a complex network of social relations”, which “determine which subjects can appear where, and in what capacity” (Namaste, 1994:221). This construction “through specific sociopolitical

¹⁷ In the original: “Lo que transforma a la sociedad es una visión crítica de los valores de la masculinidad y sus instituciones y esta reflexión no la hacen los hombres por razones obvias, ése es su lugar de poder e identidad”, own translation.

arrangements” (ibid) is present in early civilizations such as the Ancient Greeks, who already theorized on female sexuality from an androcentric perspective:

“[t]o the Greeks female sexuality differed from male sexuality precisely in that sexual pleasure for women was intimately bound up with procreation. [...] [I]n the absence of men, women’s sexual functioning is aimless and unproductive, merely a form of rottenness and decay, but by the application of male pharmacy it becomes once orderly and fruitful.” (De Lauretis, 1988:157)

The Greeks believed that the particular shape of women’s genitalia, along with the fact that unprotected heterosexual sex is capable of impregnating women, marks an undeniable link between hedonistic and reproductive sex in the woman’s body. It was the male seed, the male organ, the one in charge of giving women their humanity back, since male sexual productivity was thought to make women “tamed, mastered, and [...] fruitful” (ibid) — this metaphor recurrently appearing in Plato’s *Timaeus* (qt. in ibid).

This belief found ways to maintain itself during the following centuries, and the idea of a female sexuality irrefutably linked to procreation influenced posterior thought currents such as psychotherapy (Irigaray, 1985) and contemporary gynecological practices (Lauretis, 1988:157). However, scholars such as David Halperin have questioned this model, noting that

“[i]n order to facilitate their own appropriation of the feminine men have initially constructed femininity according to a male paradigm while creating a social and political idea of masculinity defined by the ability to isolate what only women can *actually* isolate — namely, sexuality and reproduction, recreative and procreative sex.” (Halperin, qt. in Lauretis 1988:158)

This results in a patriarchal sexual culture strongly marked by men’s desires and sexual needs — women constituting mere objects of pleasure, rather than individuals actively seeking pleasure. The woman subject is denied, her desires dismissed, and her sexual agency erased. She remains an accessory, a vase in which men project their fantasies and exert domination — a domination that is reproduced in all social situations.

However,

“[a]fter remarking on the similarity between the Greek construction and the contemporary gynecological discourses on female eroticism, Halperin raises the question of Plato’s politics of gender, noting that ‘the interdependence of sexual and reproductive capacities is in fact a feature of male, not female, physiology’, and that male sexuality is the one in which ‘sexual pleasure and reproductive function cannot be separated’ (Lauretis, 1988:158).

The patriarchal sexual culture at work in heterosexist cultures has been able to reproduce the belief that men, and not women, are the ones who can isolate sexual from reproductive activity, whereas in reality, the presence of the clitoris (the only organ in the human body destined exclusively for pleasure) outside of the vaginal cavity is already an irrefutable proof that women can *indeed* isolate sexual pleasure from reproduction (Salami, 2016). Furthermore,

“[t]he psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality, wrote Luce Irigaray in 1975, outlining the terms of what here I will call sexual (in)difference, tells ‘*the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*’. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual”. (Lauretis, 1988:156) (Italics from the original)

Masculine conceptualization of feminine parameters (Irigaray, 1985:23) results in a construction of sexuality in which men define desire, pleasure, and the protocol of social relationships based around sex and procreation. Against this background, female specificity and desires are erased, becoming an appendix to male sexuality, and thus, an extension of the male sex. As a result, we can no longer speak of two or more different sexes, but only one — the male sex, the one which marks and defines the lines along which the rest of sexes and sexualities must act.

Luce Irigaray approaches this conceptualization from an ironical standpoint:

“[w]ith the term *hommo-sexuality* [*hommo-sexualité*] — at times also written *hom(m)osexuality* [*hom(m)osexualité*] — Irigaray puns of the French word for man, *homme*, from the Latin *homo* (meaning ‘man’) and the Greek *homo* (meaning ‘same’). In taking up her distinction between homosexuality (or homo-sexuality) and ‘hommosexuality’ (or ‘hom(m)osexuality), I want to remark the conceptual distance between the former term, homosexuality, by which I mean lesbian (or gay) sexuality, and the diacritically marked hommo-sexuality, which is the term of sexual indifference, the term (in fact) of heterosexuality [...]” (Lauretis, 1988:156)

In fact, her distinction of these homophones introduces an explicit way of conceptualizing society’s love for men. There is an undeniable distance between “homosexuality” as same-sex love, and hommosexuality as both heterosexual and gay male sexualities. Even if heterosexual culture proclaims its love for women, the focus of love in patriarchal cultures is found in the figure of the man:

“[c]ontradictorily, women are not loved by culture, but rather, desired, possessed, and feared. Men are the ones who are loved, by women and by men themselves, building in this way a misogynistic culture that loves men and despises women¹⁸.” (Pizano, 2003-2:76)

As a result, the currents of hommoosexuality and (male) homosexuality impregnate our cultural conceptions of love and desire, setting several destructive expectations for women, who must act along the rules marked by patriarchal culture in order to be realized in their function of sexual objects.

This male definition of what women are and can be (on sexual grounds as well as elsewhere) is not innocent in itself, it responds to a historically marked dread of women:

“[t]hat the male need to control women sexually results from a primal ‘fear of women’ and of women’s sexual insatiability. It seems more probable that men really fear not that they will have women’s sexual appetites forced on them or that women want to smother and devour them, but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional — therefore economic — access to women *only* on women’s terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix.” (Rich, 1980:134, italics from the original)

The form of sexual terrorism that men fear is not equivalent to women’s fear of men. Whereas our fear is mostly focussed on the issue of rape and sexual slavery, men’s terror is focused on them not being essential anymore, as patriarchal culture has tried to make us believe for a long time. With this realization, the male need of maintaining their status by indoctrinating females in their necessary love for men appears as a necessary prelude to maintain sexual difference in patriarchal societies. The maintenance of societal love for men is what acknowledges the power of men to rule over everyone deemed inferior. It is through sex that patriarchy is maintained.

Consequences of patriarchal hommoosexuality

“The more or less exclusive — and highly anxious — attention paid to erection in Western sexuality proves to what extent the imaginary that governs it is foreign to the feminine” (Irigaray, 1985:22-3). As introduced above, male sexual hierarchy permeates all social stances, affecting industries such as advertising, cinematography, pornography, and many others. As a result,

¹⁸ In the original: “Contradictoriamente no somos las mujeres las amadas por la cultura, sino más bien, las deseadas, poseídas y temidas. Son los hombres los amados, tanto por las mujeres como por los propios hombres, construyendo así una cultura misógina que ama a los hombres y desprecia a las mujeres” (Pizano, 2003-2:76), own translation.

“the appropriation of the feminine for the erotic ethos of a male social and intellectual elite [...] had the effect not only of securing the millenary exclusion of women from philosophical dialogue, and the absolute excision of non-reproductive sexuality from the Western discourse on love” (Lauretis, 1988:158).

Women’s needs and desires are contingent to men’s, and this subordination results in a sexual knowledge system shaped by men’s bodies, men’s organs, men’s desires, and men’s pleasures. One example of this can be found in mainstream pornography, where most of the scenes finish with the male orgasm (commonly *on* the woman’s body, as if their climax per se was not enough), leaving the female performer as a mere recipient of male’s pleasure, unable to ensure pleasure for herself. Given the astonishing lack of sexual education focused on women’s needs, this *a priori* staging of virtual, unreal fantasies becomes the only sexual education many receive, reproducing pornographic sex in their real life sexual encounters, and thus replicating and maintaining homosexuality in society.

Given that “the history of human species is demarcated by different sexed bodies, woman-body/man-body” and that “a system of significations is built above this bodies”, this results in “values, symbols, customs, and habits that normalize not only our bodies, but our sexualities and thus, our lives, limiting us to an exclusive model of reproductive heterosexual sexualities¹⁹” (Pizano, 2003-2:75). This also has the effect of constructing a “hierarchy of males” (Lauretis, 1988:158), in which “all sexualities, all bodies, and all ‘others’” are bonded to this “heterosexual social contract” (ibid). Consequently,

“[w]oman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a *masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own*, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will ‘take’ her as his ‘object’ when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants.” (Irigaray, 1985:22-3, italics added for emphasis.)

¹⁹ In the original: “[l]a historia de la especie humana está demarcada por cuerpos sexuados diferentes, cuerpo-mujer/cuerpo-hombre. Sobre estos cuerpos se construye todo un sistema de significaciones, valores, símbolos, usos y costumbres que normalizan no sólo nuestros cuerpos, sino la sexualidad y, por ende, nuestras vidas, delimitándonos exclusivamente al modelo de la heterosexualidad reproductiva” (Pizano, 2003-2:75), own translation.

The imposition of a sexual hierarchy of males in which women are mere objects results in the erasure of women's sexual agency. As an otherized subject, woman may no longer know how to exert any power in order to satisfy her own needs. She may become, sort of a inmate subjected to Stockholm Syndrome, oblivious of her own desires, accepting men's as if they were hers. Heterosexuality in women, as a result, is a socially imposed obligation that some implement in their lives as a choice. Being oblivious of the social and anthropological consequences of homosexuality causes woman to become "indefinitely other in herself", a "whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious" being, "unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (ibid) to the eyes of men. Heterosexuality, in this sense, holds us captive in the mentality that this so-called "natural inclination" is indeed a choice and not a social construction. In which space can woman's desires prosper? What alternatives are there to overcome this patriarchal construct and free ourselves along with our sexualities? This is an issue that Lesbian Feminism has extensively addressed.

II. GOING SPECIFIC: LESBIAN EXISTENCE IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETIES

“Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbianism existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with the behaviour demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men. These women, our fore Sisters, millions whose names we do not know were tortured and burned as witches.”

Adrienne Rich²⁰

What is a lesbian?

“Lesbians are not women”, wrote Monique Wittig in 1978 (Wittig, qt. in Lauretis, 1988:165). This statement appeared as the conclusion to her influential essay *The Straight Mind*, and its repercussions have lingered across generations. It is probably one of the most debated, criticized and attacked statements of feminist theory, and still, more and more lesbian feminists everyday employ it to serve particular political purposes. What did Wittig mean by this statement? Are lesbians an unknown gender category outside of the binary? Or is this just a way to criticize the construction of womanhood according to patriarchal lines?

If we want to think about the category of lesbian, it is first necessary to define what this category accounts for. Lesbian, according to Teresa de Lauretis, is “a subject defined in terms of a sexual similarity” (Lauretis, 1988:169), an individual whose gender identity matches the ones of the people with whom they engage in romantic and/or sexual relationships²¹. Moreover, “lesbianism corresponds to an historical-political thought that has its own characteristics, which are not comparable nor similar to the experiences of heterosexual women, even though, as women, we are

²⁰ As quoted in Thompson, 2017:23.

²¹ It is necessary to bear in mind that not all people desire sexual contact with other humans. In this sense, being an asexual lesbian means that, even though genital contact is not achieved (or at least, not consensually achieved), this does not mean that the individual may not experience romantic attachment to other people. Similarly, not everyone is capable or does not wish to feel romantic attachment to other individuals. Neither of these possibilities work in the detriment of their identification as lesbians.

equally devalued²²” (Pizano, 2003-2:77). Lesbians and heterosexual women, given their different life experiences, do not share a common ground besides their subjugation as not-men. The presence of lesbianism throughout history presents particular social and political challenges for the lives of those who are understood to be women but do not “behave” like women are expected to, according to the patriarchal definition of womanhood. The lesbian is a subject in which the currents of “imitation and desire can coexist” (Butler, 1993:316), even though patriarchy defines these two as “mutually exclusive oppositions” (ibid). The definition of love as desire and admiration as imitation find a common ground in the experience of lesbians, and this is something that already goes against patriarchal definitions in the sense that these “mutually exclusive oppositions [serve] a heterosexual matrix” (ibid).

Given that lesbians are ‘the other’ in this setting, “becoming a lesbian requires a continual process of coming out”, and this is a process “through which identity is claimed and embraced” (Zimmerman, 1984:668). Coming out as a lesbian, presenting oneself as lesbian to the eyes of the world is a definitional act. Claiming one’s lesbian identity, and using the term “as a global term” is “a political act” (King, 2002:34), in the sense that visibility of unconventional or banned identities is a powerful statement. Accordingly,

“[s]peaking, especially naming one’s self ‘lesbian’, is an act of empowerment. Power, which traditionally is the essence of politics, is connected with the ability to name, to speak, to come out of silence [...]. Powerlessness, on the other hand, is associated with silence and the ‘speechlessness’ that a powerful impose on the dispossessed of language” (Cliff, 1978, as qt. in Zimmerman, 1984:671).

Lesbian existence is characterized by its powerlessness, for what defines a lesbian is her denial of patriarchal rules that impose heterosexuality as the only possibility. Coming out as a lesbian, thus, is neither a safe nor a desirable decision, but it is a necessary one if one wishes to escape the speechlessness that is imposed upon us.

But what happens when privilege is lacked not only in sexual grounds (as it happens with white, middle class, neuronormative, able bodied lesbians), but in other embodied aspects as well? Rubin (qt. in Lauretis, 1988:164) notes that lesbians are not only oppressed “as women” or “as queers and perverts” with unconventional sexual preferences, but “*also* as women of color” (ibid, italics from the original). This “also”, “which is neither simply additive nor exclusive”, “signals the

²² From the original: “[e]l lesbianismo corresponde a un pensamiento histórico-político que tiene características propias y que no son comparables, ni semejantes a la experiencia de las mujeres heterosexuales, aunque como mujeres seamos igualmente desvalorizadas” (Pizano, 2003-2:77), own translation.

nexus, the mode of operation of *interlocking* systems of gender, sexual, racial, class, and other, more local categories of social stratification” (ibid), resulting in a superposition of axis of oppression that acts as a way to de-escalate positions in the pyramid of privilege in which white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied men hold the top position. The lesbian of color suffers several oppressions that make themselves visible in different social settings. She may be discriminated against for being a woman, for not being white, for being a lesbian, and sometimes for all of the above at once and more. Social sciences have the responsibility of including excluded subjects — such as the white lesbian, and especially the lesbian of color — if they wish to accurately account for the ways in which oppression operates in patriarchal societies, for that “[t]he lesbian of color is not only invisible, she doesn’t even exist. Our speech too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane” (Anzaldúa, 1983:165). Giving back their voice to oppressed collectives is a political, intellectual, and social imperative. Only through this realization, a comprehensive and inclusive study of society will be effectively achieved.

Luce Irigaray speaks of this powerless status as “a kind of double other”: “as a woman, she is the other to man’s subjectivity and economy; as a homosexual, she is the other to heterosexual relations formulated around reproduction” (Irigaray, 1985:108). I would like to extend this definition in order to include lesbians of color, lesbians with neuronal and physical diversity, lesbians whose gender is non-binary, and those who belong to all the above mentioned categories at once. As a result, we can speak of triple, quadruple, and even quintuple others. Their existence automatically situates them in the outskirts of society, something that Irigaray has conceptualized under the definition of “lesbian as ‘otherness’” (Holmlund, 1989:108):

“[t]hrough their ‘otherness’, lesbian sexual practices call attention to the characteristics of female sexuality Freud neglected or redefined in terms of a masculine model. Though the ‘feminine’ may still be elusive, inarticulate, and/or repressed in contemporary western societies, female sexuality does exist and can be described” (ibid).

Psychoanalysis has long tried to describe woman and lesbian experience using masculine parameters. In the case of the lesbian, Freud believed them to be subjected to “a *masculine* desire and tropism” (Lauretis, 1988:156, italics from the original), as eunuch female versions of male homosexuals. Irigaray summarizes his findings in his only case study focusing on lesbians²³ with the following statement: “[o]nly as a man can a female homosexual desire a woman who reminds her of a man” (Irigaray, as qt. in Holmlund, 1989:106). The belief that lesbian love departs from

²³ Freud’s only study on lesbians is entitled ‘The psychogenesis of a case of homosexuality in a woman’, and it can be found in *The international Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 1, No 2, published in 1920.

masculine identification (that lesbians are trying to be men, and only as men can they love other women who try to be men) explains why “Freud was at loss with his homosexual female patients” (Lauretis, 1988:156).

However, this lack of accuracy in Freud’s work unveils a deeper realization:

“[y]et because the lesbian makes love to another woman outside of the confines of reproductive sex, she stands as the supreme threat to Freud’s system. Her existence jeopardizes his conflation of femininity and motherhood. [...] [L]esbians, Freud himself admits, are ‘ignored by the law [and]... neglected by psychoanalytic research’ because, again in Irigaray’s words, they expose ‘all femininity as, precisely, a masquerade imposed on women by male systems of representation’” (Holmlund, 1989:107, commenting on Irigaray, 1985)

The existence of lesbians “displac[es] hegemonic heterosexual norms” (Butler, 1993:310), which may be the reason why knowledge systems such as psychoanalysis have erased the lesbian subject, ignoring it, going around it without spending any more time than absolutely necessary in its conceptualization, for they implicitly know that a deeper study of the lesbian subject may threaten to dismantle the heterosexist status quo operating in patriarchal societies.

The existence of lesbianism on its own is already a powerful statement against the argument of a “natural” or “biological” heterosexual inclination in humans. Monique Wittig addresses this idea with the metaphor of the lesbian society: “[a] lesbian society pragmatically reveals that the division from men of which women have been the object is a political one and shows that we [women] have been ideologically rebuilt into a ‘natural group’” (Wittig, 1993:103), and this entails the realization that

“[...] there is no natural group ‘women’ (we lesbians are the living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question ‘woman’, which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth. She said: ‘One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society’: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Wittig, 1993:103).

The lesbian is not a woman; womanhood has not been defined to include lesbians, and it thus is not a casualty but a well-designed patriarchal strategy. Against this background, “[w]oman-identified lesbianism is, then, more than a sexual preference, it is a political choice” (Bunch, 1975:30), and our empowerment as lesbians is a political act. The lesbian “not only transgress[es] the historical mandate of subordination to the masculine, but, at the same time, she possess[es] the potentiality of

healing from their own misogyny in order to re-symbolize themselves, not according to other's [definition], but to their own²⁴" (Pizano, 2003-2:76).

Existing as a lesbian in this world poses serious threats to the patriarchal status quo. Lesbianism appears to be a necessarily politicized identity, but which are the causes? How can we conceptualize, name, and address the oppressive systems that render lesbian existence marginal and abject? This is a topic Adrienne Rich has extensively addressed in her work.

About lesbian oppression(s)

"The king does not count lesbians", wrote Marilyn Frye in 1983 (qt. in Lauretis, 1988:170). Her statement aimed to denounce the unspeakability of the lesbian subject, ignored by power structures and governors, absent, invisible, abject. Her realization came from a long tradition of lesbian silencing, for that

"lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of *keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women*, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain." (Rich, 1980:136, italics added for emphasis)

Lesbians are one of the few populations in the world that have not had access to a cultural record. Our journals, letters, and writings have disappeared, our existence erased, and our voices denied. This trend, according to Adrienne Rich, responds to a historical "bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian existence is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible" (ibid:134). Additionally, "[i]f we think of heterosexuality as *the natural emotional and sensual inclination for women*, lives such as these are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived" (ibid: 137, italics from the original). The lesbian is 'the sick other' in a world in which "heterosexual romance has been presented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment" (ibid:139). The lesbian appears thus as a subject lost in its own self and oblivious of the so-called rightfulness and naturalness of heterosexual romance.

²⁴ From the original: "[s]e podría desprender entonces, que las mujeres que aman a mujeres, es decir, las lesbianas, no sólo transgreden este mandato histórico de subordinación a lo masculino, sino que, al mismo tiempo, poseen la potencialidad de sanarse de la propia misoginia para resimbolizarse, no en función de otros, sino de sí mismas" (Pizano, 2003-2:76), own translation.

The idea of heterosexual romantic love as “ideology [...] beamed at [women] from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool ready to the procurer’s hand and one which he does not hesitate to use” (ibid:134). Patriarchy has fed “[e]arly female indoctrination in ‘love’” in Western societies, but “a more universal ideology concerns the primacy and uncontrollability of the male sexual drive” (ibid). Women, whether voluntarily or out of fear, *must* integrate the idea that their lives are worthless if they are not dedicated to love men and breed children for them, an idea that has been continuously reproduced in all sorts of cultural practices and referents. Western tradition assumes that “women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men” (ibid:140), and this masochism has been presented as innate and desirable, which is one of the reasons that explain the all-pervasive culture of violence women are subjected to in most countries of the world.

Correspondingly, the idea that “most women are innately heterosexual” (ibid:135) and that “heterosexuality [is] the original, the true, the authentic” orientation (Butler, 1993:312) becomes implemented and reinforced since childhood (i.e. Disney movies), becoming a necessary part of socialization processes at stake in Western societies. In this sense, “the ‘reality’ of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself as the origin and the ground of all imitations” (ibid:313), leaving lesbians in a position of “speechlessness, invisibility, and inauthenticity” (Zimmernan, 1984:672). Our love for women is understood to be a fool reproduction of the heterosexual paradigm, a “vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail” (Butler, 1993:312). The lesbian is “a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real” (ibid). Lesbianism “has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (Rich, 1980:135) calls into question the heterosexual foundation of patriarchy as a whole.

However, “lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited” (Butler, 1993:312), in the way that male homosexual relationships have gone against the law in many parts of the world, and this is because same-sex love in women “has not made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable” (ibid). For many regimes in the world, the lesbian simply does not exist (King, 2002). Against this light,

“it becomes important to recognize that oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of unviable (un)subjects — *abjects*, we

might call them — who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law.” (ibid, italics from the original)

Lesbianism may not be prohibited per se, but its invisibilization serves a particular purpose. “The fear of lesbians has been one of the most important fears society has invented, it is not innocent, it has been one of the best designs and immobilizing trainings for women²⁵” (Pizano, 2003-1:66),. The erasure of the lesbian possibility based on its abject status has served the purpose of maintaining the idea that women must love men more than they love themselves. This is an all-pervading mentality that constructs the lesbian as deviant, and sets heterosexuality under men’s terms as the innate orientation and only possibility for each and every one of us.

As shocking as it may be, the “forcing of [lesbian] relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other*” (Rich, 1980:139, italics from the original). The rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility acts against the women collective as a whole, including heterosexual women. By discarding “women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community” (ibid), the feminist movement as a whole is disempowered, since “lesbian energy fuels much of what is labeled ‘women’s culture’” (Zimmerman, 1984:669). Without lesbians, there would not be a Feminist movement. Through the invisibilization of lesbians, the women’s liberation efforts fall on deaf ears.

Heterosexuality has been “both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women”, “[y]et everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty” (Rich, 1980:138). Loving women and suffering the consequences of a violent patriarchy are trends that have gone hand in hand throughout history. “Perhaps if we give up loving women, we will be worthy of having something to say worth saying” (Anzaldúa, 1983:167), and perhaps our existences would cease to be surrounded by violence. Denying oneself appears as the only way of ‘counting’ in this heterosexist culture in which lesbian existence is defined as deviation²⁶.

One last oppression that I would like to address here is related to the issue of ‘passing’. Although “[c]ompulsory heterosexuality’ was named one of the ‘crimes against women’ by the

²⁵ From the original: “El miedo al lesbianismo es uno de los miedos más importantes que ha inventado la sociedad, no es inocente, ha sido uno de los mejores diseños y adiestramientos inmovilizadores para las mujeres” (Pizano, 2003-1:66), own translation.

²⁶ I the words of Margarita Pizano Fischer, “[w]oman [...] denies herself, so as to not be negated twice: first for being woman, and second for being lesbian”, from the original “[I]a mujer [...] se niega a sí misma para no ser negada dos veces: una por ser mujer y la segunda por ser lesbiana” (Pizano, 2003-1:65), own translation.

Brussels International Tribunal of Crimes against Women in 1976” (Rich, 1980:138), the imposition of the heterosexual paradigm still affects an alarming number of women around the world. Many of these women also suffer from discriminations related to their gender expression and their relation to femininity. “Passing straight” is one of the preconditions many lesbian women have to adhere to if they wish to have their existence acknowledged in Western societies. If one presents oneself as an undeniable replica of the patriarchal woman, even if one is a lesbian, it will be much simpler and less dangerous to appear in front of the eyes of the world. It is “a dual masquerade [...] that enervates and contributes to speechlessness — to speak might be to reveal” (ibid). Since lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited, it is through social visibility that oppression operates.

Lastly, it is necessary to note that “individuals are assumed to be heterosexual” (Namaste, 1994:228), which causes lesbians to be prosecuted if they present their sexuality to the world (i.e. by sharing affection with their partner(s) in public) or if they present themselves as something other than a feminine, heterosexual woman (e.g. butch women)). However, “[p]assing demands quiet”, and “from that quiet — silence” (Cliff, qt. in Lauretis, 1988:174). Appearing as heterosexual to the eyes of patriarchy is just another way of invisibilizing oneself. Only through visibility will our lives and experiences be acknowledged.

Lesbianism as resistance

For those of us (women or otherwise) who have chosen to share a part of our lives and romantic efforts with those who are perceived to be our equals, “[t]he refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not” (Wittig, 1993:105), for it implies not only “the refusal of the *role* ‘woman’” (ibid, italics from the original), but also, “the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man” (ibid). Denying men’s power over our bodies and desires implicitly entails “a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance” (Rich, 1980:136). Lesbians are “escapees from our class in the same way as the American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free” (Wittig, 1993:108). This comparison relates racialized slavery with the belief that “what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation [...] of servitude, [...] which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation [to a man]”, something that “lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual” (Wittig, 1993:108).

In a way, “lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely” (ibid), since our positioning outside of heterosexual romantic relationships already situates us one step closer to our liberation. Refusing men’s power and men’s desires in our sexual and

romantic relationships entails a surreptitious denial of patriarchal power to rule over our lives, and this is something that defies the heterosexual class system at stake in most societies. Our survival as human beings and as a class depends on the “destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression” (ibid). Through this denial of the heterosexual norm, “lesbians have maintained to a far greater degree than heterosexual feminists a cohesive, critical view of the family and heterosexuality” (Zimmerman, 1984:668), something that heterosexual women, given their physical and symbolic attachment to men, have simply not envisioned.

In this sense, lesbian women have been able to produce a different kind of feminism, one that “sees the institutionalization of heterosexuality as one, of not *the*, cornerstone of oppression” (Reinfelder, 1994, as qt. in King, 2002:38, italics from the original). The ideology born from this mentality, Lesbian Feminism, locates itself in “lesbianism as a political choice” (ibid), a conscious and active election of denying men’s power over women’s bodies, and creating a culture in which women can live free of patriarchal violence. For “there is a *nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality” (Rich, 1980:140, italics from the original). Our election of women as lovers and life partners is, by definition, an act of deviance and defiance to institutionalized patriarchy. In this sense, our existences, outside of the heterosexual norm, are necessarily political. Lesbianism has “historically [been] a space of hiding and exposition of a different societal project, where tolerance of economic, religious, cultural, and political powers is not needed to survive²⁷” (Pizano, 2003-2:78).

Lesbianism, thus, “transgress[es] the cultural limits of heterosexuality²⁸” (Pizano, 2003-1:65), providing with a new space in which political, economic, and societal patriarchal powers do not have a say in the way in which we live our relationships and structure our lives. It is “precisely in this loving space where we can reinvent other ways to love, *that other love*, the one envisioned from *another culture*, where we recognize ourselves as thinking women not invented by others, where we can redesign other ways of cohabiting with other human

²⁷ From the original: “[h]istóricamente el pensamiento lesbiano ha sido un lugar de escondite y exposición de un proyecto distinto de sociedad, donde no se necesita de la tolerancia de os poderes económicos, religiosos, culturales y políticos para existir” (Pizano, 2003-2:78), own translation.

²⁸ From the original: “[...] traspasar los límites culturales de la heterosexualidad” (Pizano, 2003-1:65), own translation.

beings, outside of the dominant partnership [of heterosexuality]²⁹” (ibid, italics from the original).

Lesbianism offers unprecedented possibilities for women’s liberation. By identifying compulsory heterosexuality as *the* original oppression, it becomes evident that patriarchal societies are structured around men’s power and their ability to implement reproductive regimes that help maintaining this trend. Nuclear family, romantic love, courtesy, and female ‘inherent weakness’, among others, are all tools used by heterosexist regimes to ensure women’s subordination in men’s terms, often by making women themselves believe that this formulation is not only the only one available to them, but the most adequate to fulfill their lives and expectations as well.

We can thus conclude that there is “a political imperative to render lesbianism visible” (Butler, 1993:312), not because visibility per se can suffice, but because it “can only be the starting point for a strategic intervention which calls for a transformation of policy” (ibid:311). Lesbians must become an object of study, and not a secondary one that can be assimilated into other categories. Lesbians *are* a category in themselves, and this is something we ought to become aware of if we aim for a more comprehensive study of social populations, on the one hand, and the liberation of women as a whole, on the other hand, independently of their sexual or romantic preferences. “To assess the damage is a dangerous act”, writes Cherríe Moraga (qt. in Anzaldúa, 1983:171). “To stop there is even more dangerous”, concludes Gloria Anzaldúa (ibid). We must

“carefully review the need to adhere to any analysis or proposal for change that does not originate in ourselves, that does not reclaim our reflexions, our political history, our biographies, and everything that women across centuries have written and thought, if we are to stop repeating failed strategies³⁰” (Pizano, 2003-1:73-4)

Lesbian political and lived history must be written by lesbians, since we cannot expect others with different levels of privilege to acknowledge our yokes and represent them accurately. This is something we owe to all of those who came before us and were brought to death by the same desires we can express today. If I can live this way, is because others died for it. We must not forget.

²⁹ From the original: “[e]s precisamente en este espacio amoroso donde podemos reinventar otras formas de amor, *este otro amor*, éste sospechado desde *otra cultura*, donde nos separamos mujeres pensantes y no inventadas por otros, donde rediseñar otras formas de convivencias entre seres humanas, que no sea la pareja del dominio” (Pizano, 2003-1:65), own translation.

³⁰ From the original: “[d]ebemos revisar cuidadosamente la necesidad de adherirnos a cualquier análisis o propuesta de cambio que no provenga desde nosotras mismas, que no recupere nuestras reflexiones, nuestra historia política, nuestra biografía y todo lo que han escrito y pensado las mujeres a lo largo de los siglos, para no seguir repitiendo una y otra vez estrategias fracasadas” (Pizano, 2003-1:73-4), own translation.

III. A POLITICAL STUDY ON LESBIANS

Justification of the research

Part 1: Why queer and feminist theory are not enough

When trying to conceive a political study solely focused on lesbian women and female-identified individuals who experience attraction to women, my efforts to find referents of previous research were unfruitful. There seems to be little to no academic investigation focused exclusively on the political needs of lesbian women, and most often than not, lesbianism appears as an annexed category, dependent upon heterosexual women's experiences, or as a shadow of the white male gay subject of study in queer research. However,

“[a]ny theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as marginal or less ‘natural’ phenomenon, as mere ‘sexual preference’, or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions. Feminist theory can no longer afford merely to voice a toleration of ‘lesbianism’ as an ‘alternative life style’ or mere token allusion to lesbians.” (Rich, 1980:130)

Much of feminist research has focused on “celebrating the unity of feminine personality or the universality of male oppression of women”, and, even though they have “acknowledg[ed] that not every woman is white[, heterosexual,] and middle class, they have left mysterious the consequences of that difference” (Phelan, 1994-1:xiv). Additionally, “heterosexuality and whiteness remain the unspoken norm, so that lesbians and women of color are encouraged to discuss their specific histories, but it is assumed that white heterosexual women need not” (ibid). As a result, lesbians, women of color, and lesbians of color have been otherized *even in feminist research*, something that goes against the foundation of feminism as ideology, but that white heterosexual bourgeois women have not been able to discern.

We must stop this trend of “rendering invisible [...] the lesbian possibility”, which departs from the idea that “only deviation from heterosexuality requires explanation” (ibid:xv). A feminist research “that contribute[s] to lesbian invisibility or marginality [is] actually working against the liberation and empowerment of women as a group” (Rich, 1980:135). If feminism has accurately realized that its discourse would not be complete until the experiences of women of color were told,

written, and taught, why are we still trying to prove that discrimination in the basis of sexual identity is indeed relevant? Why have feminists forgotten that lesbians are an important and distinct population that needs to be accurately included in feminist theory and practice?

Another theoretical ground that has blatantly ignored the experiences and oppressions of lesbian women is the one of queer theory, and this is a point I deem necessary to raise even though “mention[ing] a power difference between men and women appears to be impolite in queer theory” (Jeffreys, 1994:461). In fact, the “queer perspective is not a neutral one” (ibid:460), it is strongly gendered and racialized, and “by not recognizing the different interests, history, culture, experience of lesbians, lesbian and gay studies homogenizes the interests of women into those of men” (ibid:459).

Furthermore,

“[t]he developing field of lesbian and gay studies is dominated now by the queer impulse. Lesbian feminism is conspicuous by its absence. Lesbian feminism starts from the understanding that the interests of lesbians and gay men are in many aspects very different because lesbians are members of the political class of women. [...] In queer theory and queer studies, lesbians seem to appear only where they can assimilate seamlessly into gay male culture and politics.” (ibid)

The field of queer studies is now “dominated by gay male sexual politics and interests”, two fields of action that are “remarkably free of feminist influence” (ibid), given that “the culture produced by a male homosexual world is as much or more impregnated of misogyny as the heterosexual one³¹” (Pizano, 2003-2:77). Ever since the word ‘queer’ entered the Academy, its use has “quickly come to mean only men” (ibid), leaving lesbians as an annex, their specificity erased, “deprived of a political existence” (Rich, 1980:136) through a tactic of ‘inclusion’ that denies the specificity of their oppression.

The cause and origin of this trend is found in patriarchal culture, which “empowers all men, homosexual ones too³²” (Pizano, 2003-1:72) but states that “women who do not attach their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms, condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as women” (Rich, 1980:140). This norm corresponds to an application of the concept of *homosexuality* mentioned above (Irigaray, 1983; Lauretis, 1988), which causes

³¹ From the original: “[l]a cultura que produce un mundo homosexual está tanto o más impregnada de misoginia que la heterosexual” (Pizano, 2003-2:77), own translation.

³² From the original: “[la masculinidad empoderada], empodera a todos los varones, también los homosexuales” (Pizano, 2003-1:72), own translation.

lesbians to appear as a “more hidden population than male homosexuals” (Rich, 1980:140), and explains why “the term gay [...] serve[s] the purpose of blurring the very outlines we need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and the freedom of women as a group” (Rich, 1980:136).

The term *queer*, even while trying to encompass and stand for different identities, falls into the trap of the universalist trend of erasing particularisms of class, race, and sexual identity. As a result, “[t]he very considerable pressure exerted within lesbian and gay studies for lesbians to suppress any difference, either in bodies or in interests from gay men needs to be resisted if lesbians are to claim any space within this field” (Jeffreys, 1994:471). The fields of queer and lesbian and gay studies need to implement the idea that recognition of the “specificity of lesbian experience” (ibid:459) is a necessary task if queer theory and lesbian and gay studies are to produce a cohesive discourse. “[F]eminist goals are not achieved simply by the presence of women” (ibid: 461), a deep and focused study of lesbianism as an identity, and about the political implications of presenting oneself as a lesbian to the world needs to be elaborated if queer theory wishes to acknowledge the feminist struggle. My goal is to set the grounds for that study.

Part 2: Motivations for examining the Spanish case

When thinking about the political needs and participation of lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women, I chose Spain as a case study both because it is the land that saw my birth — and thus the one I know best — and because the Spanish democracy presents particular characteristics that situate it as an interesting subject of inquiry. Spain is, indeed, a young democracy — the dictator Francisco Franco died merely forty-two years ago, in 1975, and, even though the democratic transition happened immediately afterwards, Spain’s current political arena is shaped by the inheritors of the dictatorship.

In fact, the political party currently in government, Partido Popular (PP, which translates as ‘Popular Party’) is the direct successor of “Alianza Popular”, another right-wing party constituted during the democratic transition, mostly by former Franquist hierarchs. As a result, the democratic party now in government, Partido Popular, is made up of several families adept of the fascist regime who changed the name of their party in an attempt to make the voters forget who were their predecessors — and succeeded³³. As a result, Spain is a democracy in which the conservative, right-

³³ The Popular Party has held the presidency of Spain for five non consecutive terms, a total of seventeen years (and is still in government). This makes it the second longest party in government in Spain— the first one being the Socialist Party (PSOE), who has governed for six terms, four of them consecutive during the years 1982 to 1996.

wing politicians inheritors of the dictatorship are still responsible for a significant share of the decisions affecting the whole country. It is also a country in which several regions (Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia...) have fought for their independence, both through democratic means (i.e. through protests and the so-called 'illegal' referendums for independence) and armed action (i.e. through terrorist groups such as E.T.A. and Terra Lliure) (Gunther et. al., 1988:509).

The population of Spain as a whole is strongly divided between conservative and socialist, and this is something that has partly been caused by the bipartisan regime installed by the Democratic Transition — a regime that wished to ensure that *at least* two parties would compete for the vote, but forced-fed bipartisanship to the whole population — an issue that has only become obvious when more parties have achieved significant percentages of votes³⁴. Before the last two elections, there were only two main parties: PP (Partido Popular, right-wing) and PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Socialist Party of Workers, left-wing), along with a variety of small parties from all ideologies who did not manage to achieve significant percentages of representation. However, after 2010, two more parties entered the political arena: Ciudadanos ('Citizens', liberal right-wing) and Podemos ('We can', modern left-wing, more radical than PSOE³⁵). These parties, even after obtaining significant percentages of vote, have not been able to achieve majority, and the presidency is still contested between PP and PSOE.

However, not all the democratic political past of Spain has been dominated by conservative politics, and as far as tolerance and defense of LGTBQI+ rights is concerned, Spain was the third country in the world to adopt same-sex marriage under socialist rule. The PSOE included it in the 2004 program when running for an election they won, and the decision became legal on July 3rd

³⁴ This also becomes evident if we pay attention to the Titles III and V of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, currently at work in Spain. These two Titles: "III. De las Cortes Generales" ("About the General Courts", Parliament and Senate) and "V. De las Relaciones entre el Gobierno y las Cortes Generales" ("About the Relationships between Government and General Courts") focus on establishing majority percentages of 50% in taking most of the decisions that affect government in Spain, including who stands as a president. This causes smaller parties to never be able to obtain enough deputies, senators, and votes for their decisions to matter, and it is what has provoked that for the majority of democracy, the independent communities have not had their voices heard, and only two parties have obtained enough votes to govern.

³⁵ The case of Podemos is a significant one that ought to be considered. In fact, Podemos is born from the 28 day period referred to as "15-M" or "the Spanish Revolution". Beginning in May 15th 2011, several social collectives in Spain began a protest that would mostly be lead by younger generations and which goal was to "awake the country" and protest about the corruption of the party system. Podemos was formed by several members of this protest, and it soon came to represent the 'indignant youth' ('juventud indignada') that had not lived a dictatorship, and thus were more socially progressive. [Source: <http://www.publico.es/sociedad/15-m-cambio-vida.html> Date of last access: August 11th 2017.]

2005³⁶. Ever since this legal modification, Spain has been presented to the world as a gay-friendly country, and this year, in July 2017, Madrid became host of the celebration of the World Pride, the biggest LGBTQI+ parade in the world.

As a result, I have chosen Spain as a case study due to the interesting complexity of a country torn between liberal and conservative forces. Spain is a combination of modernity and tradition, as well as a noteworthy example of how dictatorial societies evolve in order to democratize themselves... while still having strong marks of their fascist past. How do these forces coexist in the experiences of LGBTQI+ women? Which are the challenges Spanish non-heterosexual women and women-identified non-binary individuals face? How can they ensure their political needs are heard? In order to answer these questions and the ones asked previously, I have surveyed thirty-one non-heterosexual women and women-identified individuals and interviewed four of them. In the following section I elaborate on the methodology and results of this research.

Methodology

The research component of this essay grounds itself in the epistemology of Situated Knowledges³⁷ (Haraway, 1988). In order to obtain results on the political needs and participation of lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women in Spain, I elaborated a survey consistent of an introduction, a first section “About you”, second section “About lesbians in politics”, and a third section “About your (political) experience”. The survey was written in Spanish to ensure a greater participation, since it is not common for Spanish people to be fluent in English at an academic level, and its translated version can be found in *Appendix 1*, along with an explanation of the specifics of the creation and diffusion process. Most of the answers were open, since I did not want to reduce or eliminate any possibility of answer.

After the survey was closed, I sent emails to those who, at the end of the survey, had indicated they were willing to participate in an interview, and I ended up meeting with four of them, planing for my range to have as many diverse identities and experiences as possible. I went to Catalonia to interview Lucía (anonymized), a bisexual woman in her 20s. Later, in Madrid, I interviewed Alex (anonymized), a non-binary lesbian person in their 20s; Iratxe (anonymized), a

³⁶ Source: <http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/35179/0/matrimonio/homosexual/gay/> [Date of last access: August 10th 2017].

³⁷ Situated Knowledges is an epistemology that states all personal, lived-experiences matter in the construction of (academic) knowledge. Theory is thus constructed on the basis of personal experience, and this theory must be inclusive of all the particular and distinct experiences available to the theorist.

neurodiverse pansexual woman in her 20s; and Olga Baselga, a visible transexual lesbian woman in her 50s who is a member of the Feminisms and LGTB Secretariat at Podemos and who is a member of the Guarantees Commission of this same party³⁸.

The interviews were unstructured, but all of them asked similar questions in order to develop the survey responses. For each of them, I focused most of my interview questions on the particular trait that motivated me to choose them as interview subjects. For Lucía, I elaborated on her Catalan nationality³⁹ and her experience as a children's teacher in order to focus on education as a way to end discrimination. For Alex, I focused on their experience as a non-binary lesbian person and their Basque background while living in Madrid. Iratxe helped me get a deeper insight on the heterosexist nature of the Spanish public health system in Madrid; and Olga, given her activist and formal political experience, offered me important insights on the party system and the role played by lesbian and transgender women inside the Spanish Parliament.

As a way to break the ice during the interviews, I showed all the participants a series of pictures of seven lesbian women who have played an important role in Spanish political and social life— in order to ask them if they knew who those women were. The pictures, names, and a brief biography can be found in *Appendix 2*. My motivation behind this was to know if they would recognize those faces, if the media had covered them enough, since I thought that everyone would be able to recognize at least most of the faces of Spanish gay male politicians, but not the ones of their lesbian counterparts. My focus during the rest of the interview was to analyze the causes that had led them to participate (or not) in politics, and to offer an overview of the oppressions they have experienced throughout their lives. In the following sections I elaborate on the answers obtained for the survey and interviews⁴⁰.

Demographic survey results

The survey was planned to be extensive and cover most of the aspects I wanted to demonstrate with this essay. I was aware of the fact that my respondents' time is valuable, and thus my goal was to elaborate a survey that went over the most important aspects of my argumentation.

³⁸ Olga requested to have her personal information displayed because she believes in total visibility employed as a activist tool to serve political purposes.

³⁹ Like many Catalan people, Lucía believes Catalonia is a particular nation subjected to Spanish rule, and stands with the independent side of the struggle for auto-determination of Catalan people.

⁴⁰ I have translated all answers from Spanish to English to the best of my ability. I have kept all colloquialisms, but Spanish is however a complex language, and professional translators may be able to perform a better job than I do. I apologize in advance for any misinterpretation or poorly formulated translation.

Out of the 31 individuals that completed the survey, 74,2% identified as women, 16,1% identified as non-binary (but were comfortable locating themselves on the female end of the gender spectrum), 6,5% identified as butches and 3,2% identified as transgender women. None of them identified as femmes, which is understandable due to the fact that this identity is not very widely known in Spain, and as a result, potential femmes choose to simply label themselves as women. Among these respondents, the majority (51,6%) identified as lesbian, 9,7% identified as homoflexible⁴¹, 19,7% identified as bisexual, and this same percentage appeared in the case of pansexuals. None of them were asexual, and thus the question of romantic orientation is not relevant for the purpose of this essay — although it is interesting to note that two of the individuals who identified as ‘homoflexible’ sexually, chose to identify as ‘lesbian’ romantically.

As far as age and location are concerned, the great majority of my respondents (74,2%) are in their 20s, 16,1% are in their 30s, and a small percentage of them are minors⁴² (3,2%), and adults in their 40s (3,2%) and in their 50s (3,2%). Additionally, most of them currently live in the capital city (77,4%), although some respondents come from various urban, suburban, and rural areas. As a result, the responses obtained in the survey cannot be considered to represent all identities, age ranges, and situations found in Spanish land — I however value lived experiences and the qualitative insights produced by this method.

⁴¹ Homoflexible is a person who chooses to engage (sexually and/or romantically) with people of their same gender identity, but oftentimes might engage with individuals of other identities as well.

⁴² Some of the responses of the only participant that was a minor (younger than 18 years old) were not considered relevant for this survey, and thus the total of percentages may not add to 100%. I am referring to two questions related to past voting experience and current level of trust in voted parties. The rest of the responses were considered relevant because they affect minors and majors in the same way, even if some of them have not had formal political experience. I consider that a person younger than 18 years of age is equally able to produce thoughts about discrimination, the Gay Pride, which parties represent sexual minorities better, and topics alike.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

About discrimination and the role of education

Out of the thirty-one women and non-binary individuals that participated in the survey, a vast majority (83,9% of them) confessed having felt discriminated on the basis of their sexual orientation at least once in their lives, and 93,5% of the total number of participants were able to name at least one situation in which heterosexual women have more privilege than them. Only 16,1% of my respondents state never having felt targeted by any kind of gendered or sexual discrimination, but each and all of them were nevertheless able to pinpoint several political causes that worry them, including harassment of the LGTB collective at school, in the streets and within the public health system⁴³. Alex, for instance, denounced in their interview that they “ha[d] been harassed at school”, and although they “have never been physically aggressed”, they have “suffered micro-aggressions, both from students [at school] and from adult men [at school and elsewhere]”, along with “[being] confronted in many occasions, at work for instance” on the basis of their gender expression. Iratxe also explained that she used to go to a nuns’ high school, and she suffered bullying because the students said she was a lesbian, even though at the time she was dubious about her sexuality. Lucía, however, when she realized she was bisexual, “went into hiding”, because she “realized [she] was different” and “blamed [herself]”, which caused her to “hide until a couple of years ago, when [she] realized that what other people think doesn’t matter”, something that can be related to the idea of inadequateness and monstrosity of the lesbian subject discussed in section II.

Among those participants who openly stated they have suffered discrimination, the top three denounced settings were work, school, and the streets, but some respondents also mentioned their families and acquaintances, the political arena, and the generalized social pressure that forces them into invisibilization. Iratxe brought to light in her interview an interesting field of discrimination that no other respondent focused on, the one of mental health institutions. In fact, “[w]hen [Iratxe] was 17, [she] was in a psychiatric institution in the afternoons [...] and the therapy groups were

⁴³ It is interesting to note that Spain has a strong public health system that provides medical attention to every single person who finds themselves hurt or ill in Spanish land without cost, financed through tax funding. Even though there is also a private medical system, the great majority of the Spanish population trusts the public health service due to its availability and satisfactory results.

divided: there was one for boys and one for girls”. Although she had expressed her “uncomfortableness” with the (heterosexual) girls’ group at several times, her complaints were ignored, while at the same time “[her] psychiatrist, the one who gave medications [...] was giving [her] way too many at the time” after telling her that “[she] wasn’t bisexual, [she] only hated her father” and that “[she] said [she] liked girls and sometimes dressed in a masculine way in order to piss off [her] father”. This is something that can be understood as a manifestation of compulsory heterosexuality through the normalization of Freud’s Oedipus and Electra complexes in the psychiatrist’s view. In the end, Iratxe left the institution, she didn’t even finish her treatment because, as she explained to me, “there were a lot of weird things going on there”.

Additionally, several of the survey participants discussed feeling discriminated when applying for adoptions and when attending health care facilities. Alex in particular denounced that some gynecologists are not prepared to address non-binary and non-heterosexual patients, and that if they go to the gynecologist with period pain, the doctor will automatically prescribe the pill, but they don’t need it because “I am a lesbian, I don’t need contraceptives”, along with the fact that they may not wish to ingest certain hormones. Alex also explained that transgender people in Spain have to go through “a process [of transition] that is not well-made”, since they need to be “diagnosed” by a doctor in order to be able to transition. This ‘gender dysphoria’ diagnosis is in fact the precondition for all transgender and non-binary people in Spain to be able to access hormonal treatment and reconstructive surgeries — along with changing their legal name and gender in their official documentation (such as ID, driving license,, etc.) and be officially recognized for who they are. “You are faced with so many obstacles that they become psychological constraints, there is no family support... it’s not well planned, in general”.

The cause that is the origin of this oppression is, according to Lucía, education. In fact, Lucía “work[s] with kids”, and she “sees that kids don’t judge, they don’t care who you are”, but they “are exposed to hate speech from their parents towards everyone who is different, so [they] grow up with the idea that difference is wrong”. This is something that becomes evident “in Primary, but especially in Secondary school”, because “kids have been educated this way through their parents, teachers, the television...”. Education in LGTB existence is “needed to change things”. Lucía proposes that “there should be debates in schools, emotional education, psychologists... even from kindergarten, and for the parents as well”, since discriminating behavior is learned and not innate. In Lucía’s words, “in schools, they focus on ‘teaching’ but not ‘educating’. Education is in values, teaching is knowledge. And, in the end, [the kids] get none of those, not from the school, and not from their [families] either”.

Olga also mentioned education as a root problem during her interview. In fact, for her it is a matter of “[being] sensitive to the reality of the LGTB collective in general”. She also works as a professor, and she believes that

“parent associations at schools should receive information about the LGTB collective, because every parent can find themselves in the situation of having a lesbian daughter, or a gay son, or a transexual son or daughter — for these kids not to suffer, they depend on their parents being ready to care for [them], and this can only be achieved through information being available to teachers, parents, etc. [...] If a kid tells their parents they’re transexual, it shouldn’t be a shock, and this is something we can only change by making the government inform about the LGTB reality in schools”.

As a result, it is clear from my interview that formal and informal education is seen an important force in challenging heterosexist values. The fact that the great majority of my respondents declared having felt discriminated against in the past, even by educated people (like teachers and psychiatrists) is symptomatic of a rooted problem of ignorance and stigmatization of LGTBQI+ identities, and the trend is being reproduced in younger generations. Only through education will this trend change, and, at least in the Spanish case, education is dependent upon the central government, the government of the Autonomous Communities, and the representatives elected for Parliament.

A damaged political system

The root of the problem can thus be found in the political arena, overtly dominated by heterosexual men and, increasingly, homosexual ones too. In this setting, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women “feel out of place”, “not encouraged to participate” (Lucía), and “disenchanted”, “deceived” (Alex) with the results obtained by a political world in which their presence is not welcomed. Additionally, and besides the brief period in which PSOE promoted same-sex marriage in their political program when running for office, no party in Spain has had “a specific [political] line to stand for lesbian women” (Lucía) and thus it is difficult for lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women to identify with the politics made from one party or another. Most of my respondents (77,4%) state to vote every single time they have a chance, and 16,1% vote most of the times they can. On the other hand, only 3,2% of the survey participants vote “sometimes” and only 3,2% never votes. This is something to bear in mind when theorizing about a country such as Spain, in which abstention

reached 30% during the last elections⁴⁴, and 31% the previous ones⁴⁵, making my sample more politically active than the average of Spanish population.

So lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women and non-binary individuals in Spain *do vote*, and they *do worry* about the political future of their country, but their levels of trust are not as high as their participation levels: only 22,5% of my participants say they trust the party they grant their vote to, and 12,9% say they trust them “more or less”, up to a certain point. The majority (54,8%) of my participants however, state to choose “the lesser of all evils” (given there are more than two parties to choose from), and 6,5% do not hold any trust towards the party they vote. Among the parties voted, the great majority were left-wing⁴⁶, and only a small minority voted right-wing parties⁴⁷. As a result, it seems that the majority of the survey participants and interviewees grant their vote to left-wing parties, and it is a more consistent vote than the majority of the Spanish population.

However, among the parties voted, there is an astonishing lack of lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women, and the ones present, although visible, are often overlooked both by mainstream media, and by the rest of the parties. “In mass media you don’t get to see any feminist women, and much less if they’re lesbians”, stated Olga. In fact, among my interviewees, only Olga was able to name two of the seven lesbian women presented in *Appendix 2*, and the rest were only able to recognize a few faces. Lucía, Iratxe, and Alex recognized between two and four of these women, explaining that they had seen some of their faces on television, but could not remember their names. Additionally, 61,3% of the survey participants could not think of any lesbian woman in politics, and only 19,3% of the total were able to name at least one. The most named was Beatriz Gimeno, who appeared in 6,5% of the responses, and is by far the most famous lesbian activist on the list. This kind of invisibilization of lesbian identities feeds into historical trends that have perpetually erased lesbians from public, political, and, indeed, private life.

Without referents, the participation of lesbian, pansexual, and bisexual women in the contemporary Spanish political arena is compromised. “Lesbians in politics are completely

⁴⁴ Source: <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2016/06/26/576ecfb8ca47416b648b45a9.html> [Last access: August 11th 2017].

⁴⁵ Source: <http://www.lavanguardia.com/vangdata/20151217/30871113286/evolucion-participacion-elecciones-generales.html> [Last access: August 11th 2017].

⁴⁶ 61,3% of the participants give their vote to Podemos, 29% to PSOE, another 29% to Izquierda Unida (republican left-wing party), 19,4% to the animal rights party (PACMA), and 19,4% give their vote to smaller (often, regional) left-wing parties.

⁴⁷ Only 3,2% of the surveyed individuals give their vote to the ruling party, the Partido Popular; 12,9% give it to the liberal wing, Ciudadanos, and only 9,7% give their vote to smaller right-wing parties.

overlooked [...]. There is a systematic patriarchal denial of difference, and politics in general is governed by men” (Olga). Additionally, “we carry with us a tradition of invisibilization, in part because it’s easier to live in the invisibility rather than exposed. We have gotten used to work in the backstage, like ants” (Olga). Lesbians in Spanish political history have been negated and rendered invisible, “they are silenced within their own parties, even Podemos, PSOE, [and other left-wing parties], and I won’t even mention the right-wing ones!” (Lucía). 90,3% of the survey respondents consider that no party in Spain is representative of lesbians, and 54,8% believe they do not stand for gay men either. This is something that I relate to the previous point that gay men, although still discriminated, find themselves in a better situation than the individuals surveyed in this essay.

When lesbian (and gay male) existence is present and visible, it is often because they are used as tokens: “the only [parties] who want to invite LGTB people to their events are only trying to get more votes” (Lucía), and it becomes “a bit of a parade, as if they were saying ‘look at our homosexual members!’” (Iratxe). However, homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual men have it easier: “I have seen a certain gappatriarchy, even misogyny, among gay men [at Podemos]” (Olga), causing “tensions”, which is why there is a working group inside the party concerned with “new masculinities”, according to Olga. “Lesbians in Podemos have run away from the LGTBI fraction due to the level of conflict and even verbal violence that has happened in discussions where gay men rose a voice they shouldn’t have raised [...] with typical macho utterances such as ‘not all men!’ and... so many male tears, especially with surrogate gestation” (Olga). Given that this is the reality of the most radically feminist party present in the Spanish arena, one can only wonder what happens to the lesbians that work inside other parties — if they manage to access these groups at all⁴⁸.

Even the celebrations that stand for LGBTQI+ equality, such as the Gay Pride, are foreign land for lesbians: “LGTB is often focused on gay men, people call it ‘gay pride’ for a reason⁴⁹, people often forget lesbian women and women with non-normative sexualities” (Iratxe). Furthermore, “all parties in Spain say they support gay pride, but they don’t really support LGTB people in their policies” (Lucía, interview). In this sense, participating in pride becomes “a way to ‘score’ politically” and economically, and Lucía’s experience on the subject is an interesting one:

⁴⁸ Lucía reflected on the problem of access to political parties in her interview: “I won’t say it’s a cult, because ‘cult’ is a strong word, but it’s a place with difficult access. If you don’t show up with someone who is already inside, it’s very difficult to get there, to access the space. Becoming a militant of [a political party] is difficult, you need to have friends or family inside these parties. You must be someone’s daughter in order to get there”.

⁴⁹ In Spanish language (in Spain), “gay” is a masculine adjective. If a woman is gay, she will come out as “lesbian”, but not “gay”, since “gay” is exclusively used for homosexual men.

“[w]hen I was celebrating Pride this year, I saw [rainbow] flags everywhere, [...] every single company had their gay flag at the door but... I was shocked when I heard in the news that two lesbian girls were kicked out of Burger King in Gran Vía, in Madrid, for kissing each other — two weeks later, at Pride, Burger King had its own little gay flag” (Lucía).

In this sense, and just like it happens with political parties, the LGTBQI+ cause is commodified, companies “appropriate people’s pain”, and “as soon as pride is over, their support disappears” (Lucía). In fact, 32,3% of the survey participants do not consider Pride to be representative of lesbian identities, and 19,4% believe that only Critical Pride⁵⁰ is. The formal Gay Pride “has become surrounded by an economic parade”, and thus “the message changes” (Alex). The inclusion of capitalist patriarchal rule effaces the interests of lesbians once again.

A necessarily political existence

Lesbian existence and particular needs are thus negated and invisibilized within the party system in Spain, but activism offers renovated ways of participating in politics. A majority (51,6%) of the survey respondents identify as activists, and among these, 75% stand for feminism, 43,8% stand for LGTB visibility, and 37,5% support animal rights⁵¹. However,

“there is not a lot of people available to fight for these [feminist and LGTB] causes because they entail getting angry, upset, and being alert all the time [...]. Every time I go out I get angry, I become a target for a lot of behaviors that make me feel violated. I know if I entered politics, I would be even angrier. The closer you are to the truth, the angrier you get, and maybe there is still a wall around me, as a means of survival.” (Lucía)

Becoming an activist is, for some, a “threat” to “emotional and physical well-being” (Lucía), and for others, an impossibility. Iratxe, who lives with social anxiety, explains that for her going to a protest “is like going to war”, because “[she] get[s] physically ill in crowded spaces” — being an activist is, in this way, a privilege. In this sense, “there are not enough options for people who need things done differently” (Iratxe), and this, along with the fact that “taking off the blindfold was

⁵⁰ Critical Pride is a protest inspired on the original Gay Pride, the Stonewall riots of 1969. In this sense, it distances itself from the economic aspect of mainstream Pride and reclaims a return to the activist spirit, focusing on the discrimination suffered by the LGTBQI+ collective in Spain. It is considered to be a more serious feminist protest, instead of a patriarchal festive parade.

⁵¹ 56,3% of the total number of participants who consider themselves to be activists stand for more than one cause at once, the most popular ones being feminism and animal rights, or visibility of lesbian identities and animal rights.

difficult, but taking it off completely and seeing all there is would hurt [some] way more” (Lucía), makes political participation inaccessible to many⁵².

However, it appears that each and every one of my interviewees does activism of some sort. In Iratxe’s case, through Twitter; Lucía, through visibility and the teaching of tolerance to small children; Alex, through their “being alive”⁵³ and at their job as a graphic designer⁵⁴; and Olga, through a life dedicated to political protest. In fact, Olga “ha[s] been in politics all of [her] life”, starting at 16 years old, when “[she] used to do sitting protests at [her] school against the Suarez laws, which wanted to forbid speaking of politics in public Primary and Secondary schools”. Her activism continued throughout most of her youth, but it was the period 1999-2006 when she became “a militant”. In 2014 she joined Podemos, and “[she] hasn’t stopped ever since”. Her vast political experience has made her realize that

“[t]hirty years ago, being a feminist and being a lesbian wasn’t a very popular option, and heterosexual feminists didn’t want to have many lesbians inside their groups because, according to them, it discredited the [feminist] movement and the group, it made them come across as undesirable to society as a whole [...] but now there starts to be a net of inclusivity”.

Olga believes that entering the political arena as a lesbian transsexual woman was her “obligation⁵⁵”, and incites younger generations to abandon the mentality that “[their] personal life is [theirs] only” and embrace “the principle of the personal is political”. According to her, the problem lesbian women face, at least in Spanish politics, is that “we do not have a class conscience and the will to militate putting the personal upfront as something political”. In this sense, Olga defines lesbianism

⁵² Iratxe expressed in her interview the following: “[e]verything related to conflict makes me very nervous. I had to go through a lot of it in high school, I had to stand for myself a lot, and so now I don’t like anything related to conflict. Activism generally seems like a conflict. People have a conception of debate as anger, they don’t know how to have a debate in a normal voice range, without aggressivity. And the second there is a bit of aggressivity or interruptions, I become very anxious and I close myself, I can’t deal with it”.

⁵³ Alex’s physical appearance is not feminine nor masculine, and thus, their mere existence in social settings can be said to have an activist component through the visibilization of non-normative gender and sexual identities.

⁵⁴ In their words: “I had the chance to remind an entire psychology department that their work against bullying was neglecting trans and queer children, which is something they hadn’t realized before. They are two groups of people who have very high suicide rates, but [the psychologists] hadn’t even thought about it”.

⁵⁵ In her words: “since we are in a neoliberal society in which individual initiative and rights are always above the collective ones, there is very small visibility of the lesbian collective. It’s true that it’s easier to live in the invisibility — I, as a transsexual woman, would live way easier if I was invisible, but I think it’s my obligation to participate with my experience [...]. We should do a change of mentality, we should engage further, and not only complain about what happens to us”.

as a particular class in struggle for its liberation, and only through active participation in politics and visibility, will we manage to overcome the yokes that oppress us.

Towards a political theory of lesbianism

The extensive analysis that I have elaborated here is complex and presents several dimensions that ought to be considered if lesbian existence is to be ameliorated. First, that the idea of “woman”, and the conception of a universal, cohesive expression of womanhood is a myth, and those who find themselves located under the sign of woman share particular battles. Against this light, lesbians seem to be, as Monique Wittig expressed, “escapees from our class [of women]” (Wittig, 1993:108), individuals in constant struggle against those who are presupposed to be their equals, but unveil themselves as allies of oppressive masculinities. Lesbians are not an imperfect version of women — nor a wannabe copy of men. Heterosexist patriarchal men and women have long tried to throw the problem of lesbian existence over each other’s net —constructing different definitions of lesbianism and juggling with the labels “man” and “woman” to define this unknown subject that appears to be neither. Compulsory heterosexuality needs to be acknowledged as one of the main tools operated by patriarchal societies to designate the lesbian subject as abject and try to overmaster it. In light of all the above, I argue for an understanding of lesbianism as a particular political class in struggle for its liberation both from patriarchal structures and from the myth of woman.

The second point I hope to have sufficiently addressed is that lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women and women-identified individuals — at least in the Spanish case — share particular political needs that are unheard from the higher stances of political powers. Education, health, and the everlasting imperative of adherence to patriarchal gender expressions and sexual desires appear to be the main causes of concern of this particular social group. However, no political party nor activist LGTBQI+ celebration has payed enough attention to the lesbian other and its imperative needs, and the feminist movement as a whole has long tried to exclude the lesbian subject from its ranks. Political parties from all ideologies must grant greater visibility to the lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women and non-binary individuals within their factions, and spend further time planning policies that address the needs and interests of the lesbian collective. Greater attention paid in education and healthcare to all LGTBQI+ individuals and, in particular, lesbians, is imperative. In order to achieve this, it seems that ensuring lesbian political representation is the most pressing issue.

Lastly, my analysis has demonstrated that the absence of lesbians in politics and the academia is pervasive and ought to be promptly addressed. Lesbians cannot be the shadow of the white gay man nor the heterosexual woman, and our specificities need to be considered if a society wishes to consider itself truly feminist. The lesbian subject is a distinct one, the only subject that can be said to live outside of patriarchal relations and men's power⁵⁶, and the implications of this existence could serve the feminist movement as whole. It is important to make a deep analysis of the lesbian subject following an intersectional approach if we wish to uncover the ways in which this otherized identity is also oppressive of others⁵⁷, and the pervasiveness of race oppressions within the lesbian collective, which — I am aware — have not been sufficiently addressed in this essay. There is still a long way to go when thinking of the lesbian subject as a political one, but I wish to blaze a trail towards the conceptualization of lesbianism as a political identity issued from common class struggles. These ending words are thus not an end as such, but an invitation for current and future researchers to acknowledge the lesbian subject and help us continue our struggle.

⁵⁶ For a deeper insight on the multiple ways in which male power over women manifests itself in patriarchal societies (denial of women's sexuality, exploitation of their labor and produce, robbing of children, physical confinement, clitoridectomy...), see Rich, 1980:131-3.

⁵⁷ Both Lucía and Iratxe elaborated on the ways in which lesbians and gay men have often tried to discredit their identities, prompting them to “choose a side” and “reproducing the same discrimination that [heterosexual] people throw at them” (Lucía, interview).

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Appendix 1. Survey: “Political participation of lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women in Spain”

The survey was created in Google Forms, and released on July 10th 2017. It remained open for two weeks, until July 24th. For its diffusion, I shared it on my Facebook ‘wall’ and two Facebook groups for bisexual, pansexual, and lesbian women. Additionally, I sent private messages with the link of the survey and a short request to all my Facebook friends whom I know are Spanish and non heterosexual. Out of thirty four responses, I eliminated two that corresponded to women born outside of Spain and living in another country for the past five years, since I cannot ensure they have enough political experience in Spain; and one response of a heterosexual Spanish woman, since her experience is not the focus of this study.

Once I had the results, I transferred them onto a Microsoft Excel sheet, and established percentages to code and operate the answers.

Part 1: “About you”

- Place of birth: (Open Response, ‘OR’)
- Country of residence in the past 5 years⁵⁸: (‘OR’)
- Autonomous Community of residence: (‘OR’)
- Gender identity: Woman / Femme / Butch / Non-Binary (Feminine identification) / Trans MTF (‘male-to-female’) / Other
- Sexual identity: Lesbian / Homoflexible / Bisexual / Pansexual / Heteroflexible / Asexual / Other
- Romantic orientation⁵⁹ (if different from sexual orientation): (‘OR’)
- Age: Less than 18 years old / 18-21 years old / 22-29 years old / 30-39 years old / 40-49 years old / More than 50 years old.

⁵⁸ I asked this question in order to include individuals not born in Spain but who have spent a considerable amount of time in the country. Spain has had a significant wave of immigration after its democratic transition in 1975, so I did not want to exclude immigrants who have had a long residence in Spain for this survey.

⁵⁹ I asked this in order to include asexual homoromantic, biromantic, and panromantic individuals.

Part 2: “About lesbians in politics”

- Do you know any lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual woman currently working in politics in Spain? (‘OR’)
- Do you know any political party or civil association (formal or informal) that focuses part or all its activity in defending the rights of lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women in Spain? (‘OR’)
- Do you know about the existence of any lesbian from the Spanish historical past? (‘OR’)
- Do you consider political parties give enough visibility to lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women in Spain? What about gay, bisexual, or pansexual men? (‘OR’)

Part 3: “About your (political) experience”

- Have you ever felt discriminated for being a lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual woman? If so, in which situations of places? (‘OR’)
- In which situations do you think heterosexual women ‘have it easier’ than lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women? (‘OR’)
- How often do you vote?: Always / Most times / Sometimes / Never
- Which political parties have you voted in the past? (‘OR’)
- When you vote, do you trust the party you vote completely, or do you choose ‘the lesser of all evils’? (‘OR’)
- Are you affiliated as a member to any political party or civil association? If so, which one(s), and what is your role inside? (‘OR’)
- Which political parties do you think stand for lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women in Spain?⁶⁰
- Do you think the official LGTB Pride and Critical Pride Parades are representative of the political interests of lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women?
- Which political causes worry you as a lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual woman? Think about problems you wish were given more visibility to.
- Do you consider yourself a political activist? If so, which causes do you stand for?

⁶⁰ This question is very similar to the one asked in the second section of the survey. My intention with this was to ask for the same answers at two different times: one out of the blue, and another after having had to think about the issues of privilege and discrimination. Most of my respondents could not think of any political party standing for lesbian rights in the first question, but many of them came with answers when asked a second time. Ironically, many of those who mentioned some parties in the first question, responded “nobody” to the second one, which leads me to think that their first answer might be based on political ideology, while the second one is based on lived experience.

Appendix 2. Interview material: Images of lesbian politicians in Spain⁶¹



Purificación Causapié

Socialist Speaker of Madrid's Town Hall, the biggest one in Spain. She also played a role in the Equality Secretariat under socialist rule.



Isabel García Sánchez

Socialist deputy in Valencia. Activist for LGTB rights and Feminism. Secretariat of the LGTB group of PSOE.



Ángeles Álvarez

Socialist deputy since 2000. Her work is significant in Equality laws and laws against domestic violence. She was the first deputy to come out as a lesbian.



Beatriz Gimeno

Deputy of Podemos, former president of the FELGTB (State Federation of Lesbian, Gay, Transexual and Bisexual People) during the time of approval of same-sex marriage in Spain.

⁶¹ All images, names and texts have been retrieved and translated from <http://hayunalesbianaenmisopa.com/2014/07/04/la-verdadera-lista-de-las-lesbianas-influyentes-en-espana/> [Last access: August 10th 2017].



Boti García Rodrigo

Former president of the FELGTB, historic activist of the LGTB movement.



Violeta Assiego

LGBTB activist, lawyer, and writer. She publishes often in mainstream media, and her work revolves around prevention of gender and sexual discrimination, and human rights.



Marta Fernández Herráiz

CEO and founder of Lesworking, the first lesbian working network in the world. Consulter of KPMG (legal counseling), writer of lesbian internet media, and vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce in Spain.