

BECOMING A LESBIAN CITIZEN: A PATH OF REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the growing body of research on the many possible issues revolving around lesbian citizenship. As a queer lesbian scholar, I am hoping here to present a non-conventional way of interpreting citizenship of non-heterosexual women, as well as put emphasis on its subversive potential. In this interdisciplinary attempt to answer the question about who a lesbian citizen can possibly be, reflection emerges on how lesbian identity is culturally constructed. Presenting insights from sociology, queer perspective, feminist studies and geographies of sexualities, the article aims at complicating the status of lesbianity (sic!) and the lesbian identity by the way of an invitation to be-come.

Though written from a particular perspective of the only scholar doing (queer) lesbian studies in Poland, the article offers an alternative way of reading a lesbian body elsewhere. When struggling to apply for, and hold, lesbian citizenship, I suggest following a certain path of self-discovery based on a specifically modified and readjusted lesbian ethics.

KEYWORDS

lesbian citizen, lesbianity, sexual citizenship, self-reflexivity, lesbian ethics, lesbian feminism

“We [...] understand belonging as a process of identification and contestation generated by how subjects negotiate a sense of self through emotional responses [to places called ‘home’]” (Johnston and Waitt 2013, p. 148)

The Place

Writing this article from a perspective of a queer lesbian scholar in Poland puts me in a very specific geo-political and social context. Poland is a country of paradoxes. Being, geographically, part of the Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and sharing the history with other countries in the circle determines the society's spirit and attitudes. On the other hand, Poland is part of the UE, though a problematic one since it does not follow 'Western'¹ socio-cultural standards or human rights policies. Nor does it aspire to do so. Although the question of politics and social moods cannot be exhausted here and deserves a separate analysis due to its historical complexity, suffice it to say that the recent radical right-wing victories and current general tendencies are increasingly hostile and violent, both medially and socially. In this sort of environment the role of feminism, activism or academia becomes even more significant and decisive. On the whole, the feminist side is not particularly strong (again—this statement requires another full analysis), while activism has its moments. Although I promote a combination and accumulation of all efforts into so-called "coalitional politics" (Butler 1990, p. 20), I myself represent the academic side of the debate. It is, therefore, through the academia (working specifically in sociology of gender and sexuality) that I am hoping to find and visibilise lesbianity. It is pioneering in that to date there has been no research on lesbian identities or sexualities specifically, not to mention an interdisciplinary one. Using queer sociology as my background and lesbian feminisms as my inspiration, I am trying to come up with a queer, well-adjusted and locally-informed production of the lesbian. Since I have been more and more involved in the debates revolving around the (re)distribution of genders and sexualities within the fields of geographies of sexualities and queer geographies, the topic of lesbian citizenships turned out to prevail within my projects. This article will hopefully contribute to a plethora of locally-specific answers. First, I will suggest a somewhat more productive alternative of the interpretation of queer perspective to the most common one. Using poststructuralist de-construction, I will then go on to briefly depict the *cultural* mechanism behind the construction of the lesbian identity. I will subsequently elaborate on the insights from, and the importance of, geographies of sexualities and queer geographies in dealing with the matters of gender and sexuality. Presenting various options of interpreting sexual (lesbian) citizenship, the article will culminate with my appeal for the constant re-using and re-working of lesbian feminisms in looking for, and finding, lesbian citizens.

¹ I tend to use the single quotation marks in order to emphasise the constructivist character of the terms like 'Western' or 'Eastern'. I reject the "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1992) of thus constructed reality, and so throughout the article I am going to use this language only conventionally and with the purpose to easily communicate with the Reader. Wherever linguistically possible, I will be trying to break the convention.

It is crucial to acknowledge that although my set of spatial and historical circumstances is only one of many across the world, one question remains valid regardless of the social reality. This question is, who is a lesbian citizen and where is (s)he? This article is one of possible stories of lesbian citizenship. It is sociologically informed, geopolitically conscious, queer-oriented, and intimately focused. Its academic and educational character is supposed to provoke thoughts, inspire behaviours, and encourage change.

Queer (De-Construction of the Constructed) Lesbian

One question I am often asked is how I manage to reconcile my queer background with my pursuits to establish lesbian studies in a country that has seen no separate lesbian discourse. My answer to this is always—it all depends on how we choose to interpret the term 'queer'. It seems to me that we got it all wrong. 'Queer' and 'theory' are in reality quite contradictory terms. A theory is supposed to be universal and provide grand and rather definite answers. It relies on the general, not the particular. Queer, on the other hand, can never be universal and grand. Inclusive of differences and interpretations, its task is to be everywhere. It should be local, specific, and sensitive to the set of particular circumstances involved. Therefore, queer is a perspective. It is a perspective of a tangible marginalised experience lived from a very particular and individual point of view, which depends on a mixture of geographical, social, economic, historical, and familial circumstances. There is no theory that could possibly cover the personal sufferings of the many oppressed individuals. Therefore, seeing queer as an (anti-theory) perspective enables me to use it as a reflexive tool of de-constructing the lesbian rather than a rushed deconstruction of all non-heterosexual women's identities. What this means is that by getting back to the very roots of cultural constructs and social conditioning, queer un.masks and exposes the mechanisms of power and oppression that have governed our day-to-day life. As I am going to show now, this very well refers to non-heterosexual women and has the wonderful potential of turning their identity into a subversive process of lesbian auto-creation.

Queer, however, is also about a certain degree of disobedience. One way I have been consistently disobedient, and yet lesbian, is through the rejection of the common word 'lesbianism' and the appealing for its replacement with less popular 'lesbianity'. As has been indicated (Foucault 1998), the -ism ending is an invention and legacy of stigmatising sexological and psychiatric discourses and as such it indicates a fixed condition, disorder or, simply, a problem. We have somehow overcome the medically-charged 'homosexuality' and started to speak of homosexuality, which has now become a norm. The -ity ending is a neutral one and brings to mind softness. There is some positive tenor about terms like 'emotionality', 'visibility', 'reflexivity' or 'diversity'. Taking all this into account, it is in a way disappointing

that no thought has been given to the construction and sound of the hard and crude 'lesbianism'². "Language is also a place of struggle" (hooks 1990, p. 145).

In order to move towards claiming lesbian citizenship, it is important to remember who a lesbian is considered to be. As a sociologist of sexuality I would like to suggest here a model of de-construction based on Jacques Derrida's (1997) 'the logic of the supplement'. Though the author established it for different purposes, it turns out to be perfectly fit for our purposes here. To put it simply, a patriarchal society relies on the woman as a supplement to the actual directive—the man. Unfortunately, the only function of the supplement is to confirm and reinforce the power of the dominant element in the equation. As such, the woman needs to fulfil the role of a good wife/mother and this is perhaps where her citizenship is most obvious. More tellingly, however, her cultural destiny is to be an object of male sexual desire. Here come lesbians, who are intruders into this male-dominated culture precisely because they ruin 'the order of things'—to borrow Foucault's phrasing—by turning into active subjects of sexual desire. Where intrusion takes place, fear is a reaction. Since ontological security has been undermined, fear must bring defence. In the case of non-heterosexual women this takes form of negation, ridicule, pathologisation or/and silence. Stereotypes concerning lesbians show this most visibly, since each and every of them takes a form of negation or ridicule, as well as a figure of the man is usually present as the indicator and the reminder of the proper sexual configuration. Although this again would require another analysis, in every-day reality this process results in non-heterosexual women not being treated or taken seriously (because, as active subjects of desire, they cannot be). The revelation that the rejection of 'true' femininity is what makes lesbians on the one hand, and the immensity of power behind the institution of heterosexuality on the other, provoked Monique Wittig to brilliantly observe in 1969 that, "Lesbians are not women". Though many a critique of lesbian radicalism of the 1970s appeared to date, lesbian feminism of that time was the greatest era of lesbian visibility to date. Never before or after have there been so many comprehensive and subversive academic volumes, reflections, political manifestoes, fiction, poetry or self-help books—all of them from and on the lesbian subject. As I see it, lesbian citizenship nowadays could come from the combination of queer thinking and lesbian feminist spirit. Both should be modified, reworked, updated and re-adjusted in terms of the spatial and social circumstances they would act on. The objective of all this should be for non-heterosexual women to get to know their multi-faceted identities even better and to create, with this knowledge, lesbian sexual subjectivity. There is a tremendous difference between the concepts and meanings of an 'identity' and 'subjectivity', and lesbians are particularly susceptible to falling prey to the identitarian discourse. To create a subjectivity would be, in a sense, to gain a citizenship.

² The same situation takes place in my native language. In English and Polish alike 'lesbianism' is the only dictionary form. Its discontinuation and replacement is my political choice and educational strategy. It needs to be said, however, that this queer enterprise of mine is by no means a criticism of all the lesbian feminists or separatists, who in the 1970s and 1980s proudly clung to *lesbianism* as a community value across the US, the UK and France. Their legacy, as I will eagerly show, remains my sheer inspiration. The aforementioned strategy of mine can be treated as a certain update or re-adjustment.

Towards Lesbian Citizenship

The above-mentioned 'logic of the supplement' tells us who a lesbian is (considered to be). But does this actually make her/him/them³ a lesbian citizen? Not necessarily so, especially since quite often non-heterosexual women 'do not exist' in that their social visibility is minimal due to the discriminatory silence covering their sexual subjectivity⁴. In order to find a lesbian citizen not only do we have to be actively engaged in the constant revealing, de-construction and redefinition of the above-mentioned mechanisms of power. Lesbian citizenship relies also on a negotiation of citizenry as a concept, as well as it requires this disruption to go grassroots and local. Sexual citizenship has been widely discussed within social geographies since the early 1990s⁵. Perhaps the most comprehensive overview of stances towards, and interpretations of, the concept of citizenship comes from David Bell and Jon Binnie (2000). The authors present citizenry as a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon. They recount some of the concepts previously explored, among others Clarke's 'deep citizenship', Ellison's 'reflexive citizenship', Plummer's 'sexual storytelling' or Weeks' (1999) 'moment of citizenship' versus 'moment of transgression'. All of them are about knowledge, care, intimacy, responsibility and self-reflexivity, and seem to resonate with the lesbian issue quite well. Furthermore, since lesbians have been discursively and by definition deprived of (the right to) sexuality, it is essential that their rights and existence be more and more often debated in the context of sexuality studies and, by extension, sexual citizenship specifically. As a point of departure when doing this cultural reading of time(s) and space(s), I would like to propose an interdisciplinary reworking of the lesbian feminist legacy. Though a certain hostility and discriminatory practices of the original movement should be acknowledged, especially regarding trans- and bisexual women, what I want to suggest is the incredible energy, with which lesbian feminists tackled the heteronormative reality. It is not the point here to tell the history of lesbian feminism. Rather, I hope to present its one particular side. As I see it, efforts, stances and initiatives taken by those women are a huge source of positive energy and could constitute a certain social plan, a mode of re-creation, disruption, motivation, and subversion. Authors like Sarah Lucia Hoagland (1988) opened the doors to "lesbian agency", upon which a certain revival of lesbian subjectivity could emerge. In practice, this could be used in the personal on the one hand, and on the public on the other, for instance for a revision of lesbian studies programmes across universities. This I call, after Hoagland's book, "lesbian ethics", and I see in it a tremendous power of a multi-faceted subversion in non-heterosexual women's thinking about their own emotional intimacy and sexuality.

³ I use the pronouns only conventionally here. Though this also needs an elaboration, I choose to interpret lesbianity as a certain quality of experience—one not restricted by gender expressions or societal labels.

⁴ It is a very different discriminatory practice than what gay men experience in social spaces. For decades non-heterosexual women's interests were driven by gay men's agendas and movements on the one hand, and the mainstream feminism on the other. The separate lesbian discourse of lesbian feminism of the 1970s and 1980s broke this unfortunate pattern. Also, see Richardson's brilliant analysis of lesbian "unjust" or "partial" citizenship as opposed to a gender-specific category (Richardson 2000, p. 263).

⁵ In order to familiarised themselves with differences and dependencies between geographies of sexualities and queer geographies (both are of significance here), the Reader should reach for Browne 2009 and Knopp 2007.

Having emphasised the importance of spatiality on the one hand, and lesbian ethics on the other, I would like to answer the question from the beginning of this article. If a quest for citizenry comes from the urgent need to feel 'home', who is a lesbian citizen? To my mind, a lesbian citizen would be a self-identified lesbian of whatever sex and gender/visual/behavioural traits and expressions, who is involved in the constant project of Self by creating own sexual and emotional ethics and sensibility with regard to relationships with self-identified women/lesbians. As such it should be a mode of becoming and a space of auto-creation. Does this need to be public? Not necessarily so, because this type of citizenship focuses on the lesbian as a *quality* rather than public rights. As much as there need to be campaigns and actions aimed at the cultural increase of visibility of lesbians in many a social space, one should not forget that visibility can also be a tricky thing. As has been indicated (Sircar 2008a and 2008b, Wray 1999), it is not entirely clear how visibility really translates into actual equality or human rights, or who is really gaining and who is losing when visibility is achieved—it can as well be a trap that serves violence, voyeurism, and imperialism. Certainly, it is not a black and white situation—visibility can also, to some extent, be a source of pride and achievement (Eves 2004).

Conclusion

Would I like to encourage or create a lesbian movement in Poland? No, I would not. Much has been said about the concept of community, both in general and in the context of the non-heterosexual (see Valentine 1994, 1995 and 2001). A lot of merit is there, but because the particularities of space and social circumstances are crucial, I believe Poland cannot afford to repeat mistakes of falling into homonormative expectations, which a concept of community will always, to varying extents, entail. Rather, I am in favour of gentle disruptions on a grass-roots level, and I believe a great degree of lesbian citizenship can be achieved through the personal (re-thinking) rather than the collective (struggles). Though it is equally important to encourage and continue “the dialogic encounters” (Butler 1990, p. 20) between public initiatives and organisations, perhaps worth considering is a form of self-reflexive citizenship that comes from auto-creation and self-development of own sexual and emotional dimensions as a lesbian. Either way, the lesbian as a high quality of personal and social experience still seems to be an unexplored field of possibilities left to the future (perfect). The future approaches must be multi-dimensional and complex enough to satisfy the need for full lesbian existence. What I suggested is a queer reading of female non-heterosexual citizenship and, to some extent, a provocation to be-come and be-long. Self-reflection and “experiments in living” (Richardson 2000) are necessary to re-read the cultural space of lesbianity. Naturally, plenty of questions will emerge. Can lesbian citizenship be international? Are there types or sub-types of lesbian citizenry? What about a global lesbian culture? These, I believe, can be faced and dealt with after lesbianity finally becomes a means of emotional and sexual empowerment within “vibrant, erotic, passionate, questioning and complicated citizens” (Wray 1999, p. 35). A field of lesbian performativities is an incredibly prolific one, but it is non-heterosexual

women themselves who have to take up the challenge. As Lauren Berlant said, "To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living" (1998, p. 286). I believe that, to borrow from Hoagland's (1988) way of thinking, there is still a lot of "lesbian meaning" to communicate and "lesbian difference" to make. It is through a truly great power in a queer emotion of a non-heterosexual woman that citizenship can be claimed and developed.

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