

Practice in Context. Dissertation Proposal. Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

Em Aelwyn Dorion

Student Name: Em Aelwyn Dorion

Student Number: 2306261

Course: BA(Hons) Fine Art: Studio, Site & Context

Module: Level 5 Research Practice

Word Count: (excluding in-text image references and bibliography): 2,348

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

To begin, I write this essay as a white, working class, twenty-one year old lesbian living in 21st century Britain. While my aim in this research is to add as much context in the surrounding topics as possible by highlighting the struggles and importance of the individuals who are underrepresented in these communities, I do not have the experiences of people of colour, transgender individuals or those who are living in the global south and can not speak on their behalf and what their experiences are.

This essay will establish a topic for my independent research dissertation by looking at three key words which I will attempt to link together to propose my research question. I will explore these themes through three core artists: Catherine Opie on Gender, Hans Holbein (the Younger) on Masculinity and Joan E. Biren on Dykes, which relates to the key words listed. These artists, as well as my scholarly sources, are picked to better dissect the themes surrounding gender-expression, masculinity, patriarchal standards and heteronormativity through a critical lens.

Gender

“Gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught.” (Leslie Feinberg, 1993)

What is gender and what is its function? What purpose, if any, does it provide for us especially now in our contemporary world? Gender, unlike sex, is a social construct designed by humans. Gender has not simply been ‘created’ at a single period of time, it has been developed over centuries, over our lifetimes, however it does not seem to evolve as much as other aspects of our lives. Men are still primarily viewed as providers and Women mothers and carers. “But no one can deny that rigid gender education begins early on in life – from pink and blue color-coding of infant outfits to genderlabeling toys and games. And those who overstep these arbitrary borders are punished. Severely. When the steel handcuffs tighten, it is human bones that crack.” (Feinberg 1993) Or perhaps

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

it has evolved, at least in language. In the world we currently live in, gender no longer has the same meanings as it did before. Where gender used to be defined by the human sexual dimorphism and social roles. It is now, even to cisgender individuals whether they realise it or not, described as a form of identity. This may seem like nothing new, if gender was not an identity before then what was it?

First we must question what identity is.

“By 2009 I knew this was no longer what ‘gender’ meant to everyone. To the young women at the bookfair, ‘gender’ meant a form of identity, located in and asserted by individuals rather than imposed on them from outside.” *Debuk (Debbie Cameron) 2016.*

In the Cambridge dictionary, gender is described as ‘a person's name and other facts about who they are’ as well as ‘the fact of being, or feeling that you are, a particular type of person, organization, etc.; the qualities that make a person, organization, etc. different from others’. Where sex and gender used to be synonymous, as if gender was a natural non-constructed factor of life, it is now a being or feeling that you are a particular type of person. This definition also broadens our viewpoint of what genders can be. In a ‘utopia’ we would achieve social and structural equality between sexes, and if that were achieved we as a society would fundamentally have no real ‘purpose’ for gender, *other than for identity*. Naturally, words change meaning all of the time, this fact is known. What is interesting however is the reconstruction of gender throughout history, specifically in the queer-lesbian communities, even in the past in its own hidden nooks. Identifying as a lesbian itself can be for many, their own gender identification. Lesbianism is perceived as being an exclusionary sexuality. This is the perception due to the fact that it is the sexual preference that simply does not involve nor centre men, and this is a very scary thing for non-lesbians. When the world orbits around men and you uninvolve yourself from them, the world can become a very isolating place. There is then an argument

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

to be made that, due to the fact that 'woman' as a gender identity only exists to serve heterosexual systems, lesbians therefore are not women. (*Monique Wittig, The Straight Mind and Other Essays* 1992)



Pig Pen, 1993

We then look at Catherine Opie's photography which captures work relating to gender and sexual identity. Opie documents the relationships between individuals, spaces, and themselves. The photography looks at playful and subversive gender expressions and represents figures who, in art, often go unseen. Opie's most known pieces include the Los Angeles leather dyke community which serve as another interesting representation of gender in photography. The images are quintessentially queer especially in their gender presentation. Many of Opie's subjects or muses sit wide and confidently, without fear of taking up space in the shot. The expression through fashion is also a key part of these photographs, details down to the leather boots and 'wife pleasers' immediately read as queer and gender non conforming. As opposed to many traditional portraits of women and fems, these models don't need to smile or appear as submissive, docile subjects, even down to the colour choices in the photos. The bold red emphasises the model instead of hiding them away. They are perfectly centred and staring directly at the viewer. Their masculinity is shown in a way which is

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

distinctly separate from men's and yet, it is still extremely present. This leads to our next key word, Masculinity. How do we define masculinity? How do we avoid the patriarchal definition of the word and not risk falling into harmful dynamics within the lesbian community especially in relation to femininity? I will look at Hans Holbein (the Younger) and his work which we will analyse from a critical lens towards themes of toxic-masculinity and patriarchal beliefs, comparing his work to contemporary imagery.

Masculinity



Henry VIII Hans Holbein (the Younger) 1537

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

Hans Holbein's portrait of King Henry VIII is what we would expect from a 16th century painting of a prominent male figure. He stands wide, adorned in jewels and expensive fabric. His codpiece is a focal point of the piece, this is one of the main examples of him expressing, or rather showing off, his masculinity. Every aspect of the portrait demonstrates his immense wealth and manhood. He holds a pair of gloves in one hand and his other hand rests on his dagger. Not only does this dagger display his riches but also that men should be expected to engage in violence. Now look at contemporary cases, while we are no longer executing wives via guillotine, male masculinity still holds some of the same principles: strength, aggression, dominance and sex. John Berger discusses how men will exercise their dominance before even communicating with a woman. "Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it..." (John Berger, 1972)

Henry VIII demonstrated his strength with his ruling, his aggression through violence towards his own wives, or by being painted holding weapons etc. The modern counterpart to this would perhaps be men in America who own guns, or to a lesser degree, the male gym culture which is centred around disordered self image repackaged in order to be perceived as stronger and therefore, more attractive.

'Toxic masculinity' trains into believing that their identity is based in their ability to display dominance over women, ways in which this is exerted is through sexual violence and degradation. When masculinity is viewed through a lesbian or butch lens, we recognise that butchness is not about any of the 'masculine' traits that were previously mentioned. A butches masculinity is more dependent on taking on the role as protective figures, and these protective figures do not only protect their romantic or sexual partners but also other members of the community. This protection is not always obvious, it may be shown in ways that are tender, careful and devoted. This isn't to say that butches aren't also strong, actually, their shamelessness towards expressing states of emotion makes them even stronger in a world that has not been kind to them. Masculinity can also be forced upon

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

people who may not have a desire to take on that role, this can include men, especially queer men, lesbians and likely most of all, people of colour. Black women are labelled as more masculine compared to white women, this is due to systemic oppression rooted in harmful beliefs throughout

history which dehumanised and alienated Black individuals such as believing Black people have a higher pain threshold or that their anatomy is fundamentally different from White peoples. and media such as the “strong Black woman” or the “aggressive Black woman” tropes. Darker skinned women will be hypermasculinised by the public and White women will be viewed as the peak of femininity even if there are no differences between each individual other than skin tone. Many things that are viewed as feminine beauty standards in society today are rooted in racism, such as hairlessness and staying petite. This also places black and brown people at a higher risk of unreported abuse, sexual violence and transmisogyny. This can also happen within the lesbian community, as it should not be void of criticism. Black lesbians are more likely to be forced into those “masculine/stud” or “dominant” positions whether that is true to their identity or not, which is another case of racist dehumanisation.

“As subsets of gender and gender expression, femininity and masculinity are both social constructs. How society views and defines these concepts differ across cultures and across history. One large issue with society is when looking at these concepts is that they believe that sex, gender and gender expression are direct correlations of each other when that is not the case.” (Arana Blake April 14, 2022)

Dykes

In this context, the word “dyke” will be used adjacent and sometimes interchangeably with words like lesbian and butch. The word dyke is one that is hard to define, other than that it’s a slur which has historically been used against lesbians. Many lesbians today have reclaimed the

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

word and even use it as a lesbian identity in its own right. In this essay gender and masculinity as key words have been discussed which leads to the topic of lesbian identity, as discussed in an article by Gloria Bates - "Dyke, however, speaks more on the gender of the person that it is describing: it is a word for a woman with an affinity for masculine energy." (Bates, 2018) The word dyke, though its precise etymology is obscure, is recently speculated to have its origins in the 1920s Harlem slang with words like "Bulldagger" and "Bulldyker" used commonly within African American communities. It is also assumed that the origins are in the word "Dike" meaning ditch, which could refer to female genitalia. The most common assumption is that the words bull and "dike" are strung together to create "bulldyke" essentially stating that these people are aggressive and manly yet have vaginas. These terms were and still are derogatory in nature and referred to generally masculine, androgynous and butch presenting people. Over time the word dyke has been used against any person who presents openly lesbian or adjacent, however the usage against masculine lesbians far outweighs those cases. The term dyke was even used within the lesbian community in a negative context, which higher class lesbians used against those who were perceived as more rough and "mannish". Now, the dyke identity is perhaps blurred. Dyke can be butch, dyke can be masc, dyke can be strong, tough and hard-working, dyke can be transmasculine or transfeminine, or a trans man or woman, dyke can even be femme. Dyke can remain unreclaimed. This is also without discussing the topic of Dyke marches, which began in the early 90s and still take place today in many cities. These marches are unlike most pride parades in that they focus far more on the political intersectionality, working class and grassroots approach, marching without permit and avoiding funding from large companies.

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.



JEB: Priscilla and Regina 1979.

Perhaps one of the most famous lesbian artists in the 20th-21st century is Joan E. Biren or JEB, a self-identified gender non-conforming dyke and radical feminist. In a similar vein to Catharine Opie's work, Biren captures lesbian and queer folks in her photographs. Though, Biren focuses specifically more on the relationships between lesbian couples. JEB's photographs are unposed, tender and full of love and care. One question emerged when researching these lesbian artists, Why Photography? Photography comes up a lot when researching lesbian contemporary art, the reason for this may be

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

due to the fierce need to archive history and community as well as to accurately represent the subjects. The depiction of the people in this photo. While paintings and other mediums can humanise a subject, nothing truly captures the moment between two individuals like Biren's photos. These images radiate the themes of positive and subversive masculinity exactly. These people do not necessarily present as strictly masculine or feminine, however you can see the feelings of protection, strength and gentleness; all traits that encompass the butch identity. This reconstructed form of masculinity offers sanctuary to many in their own bodies and identities, as well as for others who are looking for community without fear experiencing societal pressures of the patriarchy.

This is only a fraction of the research that can be explored on the topics of toxic masculinity, lesbian and queer identities, subversive masculinity and femininity, heteronormativity, gender expression, gender affirming care, romantic and sexual dynamics, love and lust between women, transgender and non binary people. What makes a lesbian? Can there be male-aligned identity in lesbianism? Should we reclaim the term dyke? Are masculine women and butches an under-represented minority in our already small community? And what actions and research are in place to preserve this crucial history?

What spaces still exist for working class butch and femme lesbians today, if any?

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

Bibliography

Bates, G. (2018). *DYKE*. [online] *Medium*. Available at: <https://thinkqueerly.com/dyke-82d7e1db3498>

[Accessed 27 July 2026].

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. [online] London: Penguin. Available at:
https://monoskop.org/images/9/9e/Berger_John_Ways_of_Seeing.pdf [Accessed 27 July 2026].

Biren, J.E. (1979). *Eye to Eye*.

Feinberg, L. (1993). *Stone Butch Blues*. Firebrand Books.

Mills, O. (2022) What's in a Word: The Disaccord of Dykes. [online] Available at:
<https://edspace.american.edu/atrium/wp-content/uploads/sites/1901/2022/06/Mills-2022.pdf/>

L. Moore, L. (2016). The Future of Lesbian Genders. [online] Available at:
https://www.colorado.edu/genders/2016/05/19/future-lesbian-genders#_edn15.

Misogynoir #2 - The Black Woman's Experience. (2022). [online] *The University of Sheffield*.

Available at:

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.

<https://sheffield.ac.uk/english/undergraduate/blog/misogynoir-2-black-womans-experience> [Accessed 27 July 2026].

Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Journal of Women's History*, 15(3), pp.11–48.

Wittig, M. (1980). The straight mind. *Feminist Issues*, 1(1), pp.103–111. doi:10.1007/bf02685561.

Photo references

Opie, C. (1993). *Pig Pen*. [Photograph].

Holbein the Younger, H. (1537). *Henry VIII*. [Painting].

E. Biren, J. (1979). *Priscilla and Regina*. [Photograph].

Gender, Masculinity and Dykes.