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Rural Relationships on the Oregon Women's Lands

Residents of Grants Pass, Oregon, may have known their rural community was changing when five lesbians from Montreal settled outside the town in 1974 and established WomanShare, an all-female lesbian separatist collective. Certainly, as time went on, Oregon citizens living in rural communities employed, served, and gossiped about various lesbian collectivist communities existing a stone's throw away, often in tones of disregard or distrust. And this phenomenon was not limited to Grants Pass: Across Oregon, feminist-lesbians were building collectives that acted as female-only spaces for full-time residents and hosted workshops and visitors, supported publications, and conducted spiritual ceremonies during their operation. Despite tensions that existed with surrounding settlements, thousands of lesbian visitors flocked to these separatist utopias in the idyllic Oregon wilderness.

Through work with primary documents from the Oregon women's lands, this research argues that lesbians who settled and founded collectives in Oregon used idealized imagery of the state and its rural lifestyles to create a shared vision for their settlements, but that this idealization often conflicted with the realities of rural life. Romanticized descriptions of Oregon rurality appealed to visitors worldwide and lent strength to the founders' visions of socialist lesbian utopias, but the necessity of employment and interaction with forces outside the collective often conflicted with the women's utopic vision. This writing argues that tension

between lesbian liberation and capitalist engagement is best depicted in differences between visitor-lander relationships and outsider-lander relationships.

As a researcher, I was drawn to the lesbian collectives because I grew up in a rural town. Families in that town did rural work—grass seed farming, sheep herding, berry picking, chestnut harvesting—because they took a sense of pride in their self-sufficiency, because they respected their connection to the land, and because they were dutifully employed. For most of the rural residents I knew as a child, they did not migrate towards country living from harried urban lifestyles as a way to achieve emotional and spiritual healing. They certainly did not host self-actualizing feminist photography workshops on their property.

The women of the Oregon lesbian land collectives lived just as authentic rural lives as my former neighbors and classmates. However, the way they cast their rural experience, interacted with communities around them, and structured rural spaces differs wildly from residents of my hometown. I had rarely seen rural living embraced with the enthusiasm emanating from the WomanShare or SO CLAP! archives I was working in; to my peers, the rural space was seen as one with clear shortcomings. Each student in my high school was acutely aware of the opportunities rural living could not afford them. And nobody could blame us; after the collapse of the Oregon timber industry in the early 2000s and the permanent closure of the local paper mill—the local paper mill that provided our town with its main source of steady employment—we were well aware of the shortcomings of rural living. We lived in the slowly, slowly recovering shadow of its desolation; few of us were filled with the hope that the isolated forests of Oregon would be our salvation. In a scramble to get out, I had never before seen such an impassioned scramble to get in.

My own background is what drew me to the lesbian collectives, and they document a relationship to rural living that centers women's experiences, lesbian experiences, and socialist experiences in a unique interplay. The more I investigated archives of these women's records and narratives, the more I realized the conflicts present in the landers' experience. I began asking questions about the women's relationships to their economic realities and country idealizations because I had experience with those tensions in more mainstream rural communities of my childhood. What I found was that the antagonism between separatist lesbian imagery of rural living as a self-sufficient utopia and the lived reality of rural lesbian experience is best understood through the differences between relationships with landers and visitors versus those with local communities.

Why were lesbians so drawn to separatism, and why did they chose to settle in Oregon? During the 1960s and '70s, American women were becoming more and more aware of the misogyny and sexism that permeated their everyday lives. Disillusioned with male-dominated and hierarchical sociopolitical systems that perpetuated systemic violence against women, historian Lillian Faderman (1991) outlines the development of a political faction in response: the separatist lesbian-feminists. These women believed a completely self-sufficient space where all aspects of life could be devoid of male influence was necessary for female wellbeing. Only a "women's culture" founded on female values and love, they argued, could rectify patriarchal violence, and "those communities would eventually be built into a strong Lesbian Nation that would exist not necessarily as a geographical entity but as a state of mind" that could steer broader culture away from masculine harm (Faderman, 1991, p. 226, 217).

These sentiments motivated the founders of the Oregon lesbian lands to establish their own communities. While the different lesbian settlements across Oregon had varied founders and

goals, each group believed that patriarchy had created a society rooted in inequities that could only be combatted through collective decision making, rejecting hierarchy, and embracing the female form. The women on these lands built homes and barns, ran collective businesses, hosted workshops, and disseminated information from women's presses. Prominent women's lands in Oregon included Golden, outside of Wolf Creek, WomanShare, outside of Grants Pass, Cabbage Lane, also outside of Wolf Creek, Rainbow's End, bordering Roseburg, and OWL Farm, near Days Creek. Though established sporadically across several years, the formation of these communities occurred between 1972 and 1976 in tandem with prominent American back-to-the-land movements and the continuing rise of second-wave feminism (Burmeister, 2013).

As the desire to create a Lesbian Nation drove women across the country seeking locations for women's collectives, Oregon's historical image as an open and free wilderness, while deeply rooted in the state's racist, colonialist history, made it attractive to lesbian-feminists, who used these themes to bolster support for their own communities through idealistic imagery. Not only was Oregon a perfect location because land was cheap and the area was sparsely populated, but Oregon has a long and storied history as a land of opportunity (Kopp, 2009); William Clark and Meriwether Lewis' "Voyage of Discovery" solidified in American minds, from the earliest moments, a vision of Oregon that held promise—promise of profits from stands of generational timber, supple beaver pelts, roaring salmon runs, and swaths of land for the taking. Beginning in the mid-1800s, settlers from the East Coast began caravanning to Oregon, believing it was their God-given right to colonize a land often described as "pristine and untouched" (Cain and Rosman, 2017). Not only did these narratives ignore the centuries of ecological maintenance carried out by Oregon's native tribes, but it ignored the tribes' existence altogether. As early as 1806, policies asserted the US government's right to Oregon land, and

before treaties had been signed with any indigenous tribes—tribes the US recognized as sovereign nations—the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850 was passed, formally offering free parcels of land to white settlers (Cain & Rosman, 2017).

Not only was Oregon's image as a free and open wilderness built on anti-indigeneity, but also on racial exclusion of people of color. As U.S. Representative John McBride described at an 1898 reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association:

[the exclusion of black Americans in Oregon's constitution] was largely an expression against any mingling of the white with any of the other races, and upon a theory that as we had yet no considerable representation of other races in our midst, we should do nothing to encourage their introduction. We were building a new state on virgin ground; it's people believed it should encourage only the best elements to come to us, and discourage others (Oregon Pioneer Association, 1898).

Historian Dr. Walidah Imarisha explains that in Oregon's recruitment messaging to settlers, the state was painted as a refuge to build the "white utopia that you dream of" for other Americans, many of whom were fleeing the Reconstruction South after the American Civil War. Oregon's public image as a utopic, wild, and free landscape was a deliberate political maneuver to erase indigenous ownership and people of color from the state, and to recruit Confederates and colonizers to keep the state racially pure (Novak, 2015). Thus, it is worth noting that the historical trajectory of Oregon as a state allowed idealism about pastoral living, and the collectives themselves, to flourish, but also had dark underpinnings that were uncritically ignored by lesbians looking to establish lands in the state.

Utopic descriptions of the lesbian lands abound. Many of the women connected the land to their lesbian identities, and as queer ecologist Catriona Sandilands remarks, "this meant an

aesthetic or spiritual orientation to the Oregon landscape” (2002). While utopic imagery was employed by word of mouth, attracting women worldwide as they “were hearing about this seemingly mythical place... visitors arrived somewhere that must have seemed clandestine, sexy, spectacularly beautiful,” as recounted by historian Sarah Archibald, the women at collectives also published books that venerated rural life, such as Billie Miracle’s *Country Women* (2021). These publications generated a peaceful, emotionally transformative view of country living, as they mention how “We feel that living with each other in the country has helped us to become stronger, healthier, and more creative,” and romanticize rural communities by remarking that in the face of hardship “our neighbors and friends [...] responded as country people through the centuries have done and as feminist sisters,” uniting rural idealism with the political/social appeal of feminist-lesbian space (WomanShare, [Advertisement]; “Building,” p.3). Many communities, like WomenShare, were established explicitly “to live near the healing beauty of nature” (Womanshare Collective, 1976, p. 64). Author Gill Valentine found that the women built “upon stereotypical representations of the rural as a healthy, simple, peaceful, safe place to live while also imagining their ‘rural idyll’ in a very different (and very politicized) way from traditional white middle-class under-standings of rurality” (1997, p. 109). This is certainly true for the Oregon women’s land residents, who use depictions of rural work as fulfilling and hardship as self-actualizing (“I left the city in search of my sanity and have lived in the country for 4 years. I learned a lot of country skills by homesteading”) while combining these descriptions with their own political lesbian-feminist goals (WomanShare, [Advertisement]).

Drawn by the utopic descriptions of Oregon, rurality, and a separatist lesbian-feminist space, visitors often wrote to the collectives asking for permission to visit and appealed to the land’s idyllic imagery in their requests. Women regularly framed country living as an alternative

to city life where “violence and dehumanization seem unbearable at times,” and guests reminisce that they “can still see the woods in my mind’s eye when I need to be real quiet in the city chaos” (Letter from Marjorie to WomanShare, 1989; Letter from Happy to WomanShare, 1985). In stark contrast, the land became a place “where I could find solitude and peace but also companionship,” to “make some connection with nature,” a “place to be quiet and center and gain strength,” a location for “self-discovery + time to go at a slower pace,” and a space for “resettling in a more peaceful atmosphere” (Letter from Marjorie to WomanShare, 1989; Letter from Happy to WomanShare, n.d.; Letter from Wendy Sue Biegdlesisen to WomanShare, 1984; Letter from Karen to WomanShare, 1991). Women regularly mention needing vacations, wanting to connect with others, and having more time for creative projects (ex: writing a novel, meditation, art). Idealistic rural imagery resonates with these visitors, and their shared idealism created a bridge between the visitors and the full-time residents who manufactured said imagery. Central to the visitor-resident relationship was the shared goal and vision of the lands as a healing space for emotional growth, creative expression, and interpersonal connection, all of which were heightened by images of rurality as simple, free, wild, and natural.

In contrast to the idealism uniting visitors and land residents, the residents and members of surrounding rural communities were regularly at odds with each other. When viewed through the lens of rural gentrification, author Martin Phillips outlines how gentrifiers tend to be from minority groups, employ self-provisioning ideologies, and are driven by an idyllic version of rural life (1993); the women’s roles as gentrifiers align with this argument and posed a tangible threat to existing rural lifestyles through their minority/fringe group status and encroachment on existing lifeways, which seems to have created antagonistic relationships with the outside rural community. Pelican Lee notes this process clearly when speaking about OWL Farm: “In the

years I'd lived in Southern Oregon, I'd seen how conservative it was, felt the tension between the lumber people whose families had lived here for generations, and the hippie communes who recently moved in. And we weren't just hippies, we were lesbians" (Oct. 1977). Her quote reveals that outsider groups—often with politicized identities—were seen as less legitimate than traditional rural residents, and this alone contributed to hostility.

It appears that lesbian lands in Oregon were left to themselves but were discussed with fear and apprehension in the towns where residents regularly found work. One letter from Bev to WomanShare about her work in a local law office is particularly telling: "I will eventually, inevitably be involved in something publicly controversial. Now, probably it won't make a bit of difference if I were living in a notorious lesbian cult, but who knows?" (Letter from Bev to WomanShare, 1987). Bev continues to propose that if her work brings too much attention to the land, she will voluntarily leave. Her preemptive discussion of this possibility both shows that Grants Pass residents were aware of the collective and its sociopolitical aims, and also suggests that peace with the lesbian community was tenuous and could be disrupted with hostile action if so motivated. The separatists themselves preferred isolation and were reluctant to seek help from doctors, police, or other institutional figures, although their call to the fire department during the 1976 fire at WomanShare and discussion of a 1977 call at OWL Farm further indicates that relationships with institutions in outside settlements were not completely hostile or were at least acceptable resources in an emergency (Archibald, 2021; Lee, Jan. 1977).

While suspicious distance seems to be the attitude between women's lands and outside communities, even as lesbians were actively employed in these rural towns, sometimes this distrust did create conflict. A 1977 raid on OWL Farm, Cabbage Farm, and Lavender Ridge (all LGBTQ+ collectives) displays both outright violence and distrust of these communities. In 1977,

police officers in Josephine County, OR seized records from multiple collectives alongside two children living at OWL Farm, claiming there were sexual abuse allegations against the women living there. The police are violent: they call women slurs, lie to them about the children's location, and make racist remarks about an African American child in their custody. The women refuse to believe the seizure of the children is related to abuse allegations—"It's harassment because we're lesbians! They're outraged that lesbians have children!" they claim (Lee, Oct. 1977). The police's behaviors are an isolated, and concerning, incident of outright violence against lesbians, but the community's reactions to these allegations are additionally telling. When stopping in Wolf Creek, some women are refused service at a diner by a waitress who was formerly their friend. A conversation with the local grocer reveals even more:

They got a complaint that y'all are kidnapping children for rituals, for sacrifice. Maybe you even eat 'em. 'Satanism' I guess they said [...] my wife told me Mabel Parker thinks y'all are Charlie Manson's girls [...] 'cause she saw a buncha ya with shaved heads in town one day. And Effie Brown's sons saw some girls swimming nude in the river, and she was sure it was some 'a yer bunch. Ya know folks don't like that much in these parts (Lee, Oct. 1977).

This quote is illuminating because it indicates preexisting unease about the women among the townsfolk; over time, the grocer has accumulated multiple different theories about the collectives (with no fewer than 5 informants!), framing the child seizure as not just an isolated incident of violence, but a culmination of growing stress about these lesbian outsiders joining the community. The grocer explicitly compares the lesbian's actions to accepted rural norms in the community, and the difference between the two is implied as the impetus for this conflict.

Navigating a tense reality of economic and social coexistence with outsiders alongside the rural idealism that appealed to visitors presented challenges in collective residents' everyday lives; this tension reflected the conflict between lesbian separatist goals and engaging in capitalism to support these communities. Residents on the lands were acutely aware of this economic mismatch: Bev, an aspiring resident, wrote to WomanShare and articulated how she wanted to seek temp work in Medford, but promised she wouldn't let her work obligations take away from the energy she would give to the collective (Letter from Bev to WomanShare, 1987). Other residents react poorly to sacrificing elements of their separatism: "I would not seek outside work in a nearby town, if that is an option" (Letter from Marjorie to WomanShare, 1989). It appears these work vs separatism conflicts are not limited to Oregon collectives, as a letter from a woman's land in Switzerland mentions how "eventually [the women] want to be able to support themselves with what they have to offer, but at the moment they still have to take part-time jobs to pay off their land and the house" (Letter from Brigitte to WomanShare, 1988). Worries about economic support—such as letters critiquing Dion's, a resident's, stock money, or those weighing benefits of city and rural living alongside issues of money—permeate correspondence between regular residents and guests (Letter from Bambara Blue Cloud to WomanShare, 1977; Letter from Darolyn to WomanShare, 1977).

Economy is not the only issue entangled with separatism and outside influence, but so too are the lands' idealistic visions. WomanShare meeting notes reveal that some women were concerned their energy was being siphoned by outside work, rather than the collective, and those who don't work in town resent those who do because they work less on the land ([WomanShare meeting record], Sept. 1992). The women who work in town are criticized and are encouraged to remember that when they are on the lands, "the work we do defines who we are" ([WomanShare

meeting record], Sept. 1992). One month later, meeting records emphasize the need to “clarify + focus + heal” and discuss a desire for a shared vision that “needs historical perspective” and brings “unity + connection” ([WomanShare meeting record], Nov. 1992). Members remark that without connection with other women at the lands, they don’t know how to cope, and “don’t know why I’m here” ([WomanShare meeting record], Nov. 1992). These women are actively balancing their need for a shared utopic vision of the land’s rurality with their financial obligations to the outside world, and this creates discussion and conflict among the residents. In these notes is reflected an argument of Sandilands, who claims when utopic idealism failed to provide shared goals, a shared physical and ecological experience preserved the identity of the collectives (2002). Overall, relationships with visitors versus those with neighbors demonstrate how women at the lands had to constantly balance rural imagery as beautiful, peaceful, and free with their economic obligations and conflicts with outside neighbors. This interplay illustrates how economic and social tensions were perpetually present at the women’s lands, and the way the women themselves balanced, reacted to, and understood those tensions in the moment.

The lesbians who settled at collectives in Oregon did have a vision for the future: a Lesbian Nation, united in feminist political thought and economic and spiritual liberation. While today the remaining lesbian collectives stand as a testament to that dream, the women’s occupation of rural space and political presence has left a concrete legacy of LGBTQ activism in southern and eastern Oregon, as well as a framework to understand interactions across diverse demographics in some of America’s historically homogenous spaces.

The lesbian lands, as illustrated above, faced near-constant scrutiny and harassment from their rural neighbors, and this only increased statewide with the introduction of Oregon’s Measure Nine, a proposed amendment to the state constitution that threatened anti-discrimination

protections on the basis of sexual orientation and encouraged an upswing in homophobia (see Stein (2011), Shultz (2021), and *Outliers and Outlaws* (2020)). As exemplified in Figure 1, the rural presence of lesbians in Oregon, including those on the lands, led to the birth of multiple LGBTQ activist groups in the area that actively combatted or were inspired by the fight against Measure Nine in 1992 and still flourish today, including the Rural Organizing Project, OUT Central Oregon, Columbia County Citizens for Human Dignity, and Basic Rights Oregon's statewide programs (Basic Rights Oregon (2015), Westerling (2004), Rural Organizing Project (2021), and OUT Central Oregon). Perhaps it was not the separatist vision they had in mind, but collective members' presence and political activism challenged norms and ultimately created space for Oregon's LGBTQ youth to take part in LGBTQ rock climbing, pride celebrations, presentation panels, inclusive healthcare, and more in the state's rural areas.



Figure 1, from Westerling's "Our History" published by the Rural Organizing Project, n.d. (<https://rop.org/our-history/>).

Alongside an organizational legacy, the lesbian land collectives' relationships to their friends and neighbors tells a story of utmost importance to Americans today: the hardships and eventual triumphs of coexistence. According to the US Census, the US population in 2020 was more racially and ethnically diverse than just 10 years previously, to speak nothing of immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, disability, or class diversity (Jensen et al. 2021). In a rapidly growing and changing country, the lesbian lands illustrate the pitfalls of community backlash: the stories relayed here from OWL Farm, for example, raise alarms about police violence, discriminatory laws, and bigotry that threatened their existence. But the lands also speak to the power of building solidarity within communities, as evidenced by their survival of 40+ years. Future works expanding on the lesbian lands as agents of demographic change and rural gentrification have the potential to help community organizers in Oregon's rapidly diversifying communities understand the historical legacies of these groups' presence. Oregon's country lesbians may not have completely achieved their initial lesbian-separatist-feminism goals of the 1970s, but they offer us something arguably more valuable in 2022: a view of the future where diverse groups can form strong communities and are protected from the mistakes and violence of our past.

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