

Grace Files

Queer Histories – Professor Eisenberg

Final Project

Lavender Menace:

A Project Exploring Lesbianism Throughout History

Bandcamp link: <https://gracefiles.bandcamp.com/album/lavender-menace>

Thesis/Abstract

I chose to amplify the stories of lesbians¹ and lesbian relationships. Due to the historical oppression of women, many lesbian relationships have been overlooked, ignored, or purposely obscured by historians. Amplifying those stories works not only to recover their history, but also to provide crucial representation to modern lesbians. Women have always loved other women, but oftentimes their freedom to do so was impeded—it is therefore crucial to ensure that queer history does not focus only on men, but also actively seeks out the histories of queer women.

Sources

Kaurismäki, Mika, dir. *The Girl King*. Montreal: Marianna Films and Triptych Media,

2015. Film.

Peiss, Kathy. “The U.S. Senate Investigates ‘Sex Perverts’ in Government, 1950.” In *Major*

¹ A note on terminology: although some of these women would not have identified as lesbians, as the term was either not yet created or not widely used in the way it is today, I use the word “lesbian” as an umbrella term for women-loving-women relationships. There is no way to know how these women would have identified today, given our modern terminology and concepts of sexuality. However, the important commonality is their relationships with other women, and “lesbian” is the easiest term for modern understanding that these were women who sought relationships with other women.

Problems in the History of American Sexuality. (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 376-379.

Sackville-West, V., Virginia Woolf, Louise A. DeSalvo, and Mitchell Alexander Leaska. *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*. (San Francisco, California: Cleis Press: 2001.)

Explanation of Work

For this project, I wrote and produced three songs. The first, “King Christina,” is about the life of Christina, a 17th century Swedish monarch. Without any male heirs, her father made sure that Christina was raised with the education usually reserved for sons. He also made sure that Christina would inherit his crown after death—although she was referred to as “Queen,” the position she occupied was technically that of King. Christina was obsessed with learning, and during her reign she embarked on an ambitious campaign to attract intellectuals and artists to Sweden while also pursuing peace after decades of war. Christina was disgusted by the prospect of marriage (to a man) and was likely in love with her lady-in-waiting, noblewoman Ebba Sparre. Unwilling to marry and produce an heir, Christina eventually abdicated her throne and left Sweden.

Christina’s story is, clearly, highly unusual. Female monarchs are few and far between in history, and for a female monarch to refuse marriage and abdicate her throne was even rarer. Deep-rooted patriarchy kept many women submissive to and dependent on men throughout history; the story of a woman who broke that trend is remarkable. The fact that she was (likely) a lesbian helps amplify the achievements of women in history whose focus was on other women,

rather than men. Although Christina was eventually pressured into abdication, her decision to live her life as freely as possible in lieu of power is admirable in many ways. Clearly, Christina's situation is unique in the enormous amount of privilege she was born into, but her story still helps amplify the achievements of queer women in history.

The second song, "Vita Writes Letters," is based around the letters that Vita Sackville-West sent to her lover, Virginia Woolf, in the 1920s. Although they were both married to men, their relationship is one of the most famous lesbian relationships in history. Their letters document an intense romantic relationship with references to sexuality, as well. Almost every line in the song is either verbatim from Vita's letters or a rephrased version of something found in her writing. Oftentimes, historians have disregarded letters like Vita's by writing off the passion as friendship. By drawing attention to the lesbian relationship enclosed in her letters, Vita's writing helps amplify the fact that historians cannot simply overlook such romantic letters between women; instead, they should be recognized for the love letters that they are.

"Wartime, Baby," the final song, is a story about a lesbian relationship during WWII. The homosocial environment of sex-segregated camps and bases allowed many women to discover their attraction to other women and develop communities. However, those communities were forced to remain underground as the government cracked down on homosexuality. Gay soldiers could be dishonorably discharged if they were discovered. This song explores the need for secrecy combined with the desire and excitement of discovering a relationship with another woman. My goal was to draw attention to the conflicting circumstances under which lesbians had to discover their sexualities throughout history: wartime was an opportunity for increased sexual freedom, but only behind closed doors. Many lesbians still experience such conflicts in their lives today.

Through these three stories, I aim to draw attention to part of history that is often ignored: relationships between women. Because history—even queer history—so often focuses on men, the stories of women are swept under the rug all too often. This is especially true for lesbians, whose lives were not necessarily centered around men and therefore fail to provide male protagonists for historians to latch onto. By amplifying their stories, I hope to emphasize that relationships between women have always existed, even when history has ignored them.