

Shannon Weber, MA
Department of Feminist Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara

“Big Dykes on Campus: Contemporary Northeastern Women’s Colleges as Queer Spaces”

Keywords: women’s colleges, sexuality, sexual fluidity, same-sex desire, queer, lesbian, college communities, space, music, ritual

Same-sex love and desire in sex-segregated spaces has a long history, not only in the United States but around the world, as feminist historian Leila Rupp argues in her book *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*. My paper focuses on a particularly notorious site of female same-sex desire: the women’s college, specifically, the remaining single-sex Seven Sisters colleges of the Eastern United States.¹ I argue that these campuses – particularly Mount Holyoke and Smith, the primary sites of my research – have become spaces for the celebration and promotion of same-sex desire in the 2000s. Further, I argue that these campuses serve as a case study for understanding sexual fluidity in action as well as for examining what could possibly happen if women lived in a larger social structure that promoted same-sex sexuality and love. I ask, what can we gain for a progressive politics of sexuality if we acknowledge that these campuses both attract queer women to apply for admission based on their lesbian reputations while at the

¹ I use “women’s college” as it is used in common parlance to describe an almost universally single-sex educational setting while recognizing that not all students on campus identify as women. The remaining single-sex Seven Sisters include Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges.

same time creating an environment that has the potential to influence and possibly *shift* and/or expand sexual identities?²

Queer culture is widespread at the remaining single-sex Seven Sisters colleges, which can be seen in the popularity of Wellesley's annual Dyke Ball and Mount Holyoke's Drag Ball. The rugby team provides a particularly influential space for the cultivation and expression of same-sex desire, with crushes on members of the rugby team rampant and Mount Holyoke rugby team songs containing bawdy lyrics praising sex between women. The well-known and rather affectionate rivalry between the Smith and Mount Holyoke rugby teams takes on a particularly queer connotation as Smith "ruggers" show up on the Mount Holyoke campus in the middle of the night to "vandalize" their competitor's space. Using sidewalk chalk, the women write messages across the walkways referencing how they had sex with the Mount Holyoke ruggers' girlfriends.

Additionally, the most popular *a cappella* groups at Mount Holyoke add to the queer culture, with the feminist group The Nice Shoes singing songs with queer content, including lesbian spoken word artist Alix Olson's song "Eve's Mouth." This song puts a feminist spin on various fairy tales, such as Cinderella, referenced in the following lyrics: "I'll get in the damn pumpkin, do it, all right. Weep and lose my slipper, freak out at midnight. But there's just one thing that the prince might not

² For the purposes of sexual inclusivity I use "queer" to mean all sexuality falling outside of heterosexuality. For the specific purposes of my paper, I do not use "queer" in the more generalized theoretical meaning of "queering" any norm. In addition, I specifically use "queer" to refer to sexuality in order to prevent subsuming transgender issues under the rubric of queer and thus erasing the ways in which issues of gender identity may be treated differently from sexual identity on campus.

like: it's the Fairygod' I'm after – I'm a dyke!" The group sings "Kiss the Girl" from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* as well, rendering it queer in the context of the members' flirtacious theatrics with one another on stage. The group the Milk and Cookies, or M&Cs, likewise perform homoerotic renditions of songs such as Sting's "Every Little Thing She Does is Magic," to wild applause from a packed audience. The M&Cs also include a song in their repertoire called "The Queer Song," using the tune of the student-created "MHC Drinking Song" to sing,

Tired of dicks and hairy asses? Drop your boys, pick up your lasses! Toast, to those who boast, of mixing milk and cookies with a little nookie. Smith, they like 'em butch and thirty; *we* prefer them down and dirty! Pick, a chick and kick, your roommate out tonight. The clothes upon the bedroom floor, I'd rather be a *dyke* once more! We're heeere! Bring on the queeeeeer! (More queer!) Here's a toast to old MHC! (Let's play!)³

The atmosphere of celebration and revelry is clear, including in the response from the laughing, welcoming audience watching these performances.

The prevalence of queer themes at Mount Holyoke extended to the spring 2006 Junior Show, or "J-Show," where the junior class works all year to perform a set of amusing skits and songs for the entire Mount Holyoke community. In this J-Show, one of the central plot lines involved a very preppy, politically moderate, heterosexual, and well-known president of the Campus College Republicans playing a character based on herself who ended up having a passionate crush on an attractive butch lesbian rugby player, played by another wildly popular student (and captain of the rugby team) also essentially playing herself. The plot culminated

³ I thank M&Cs member Caroline Finke for providing me with the lyrics to this song from memory. A video clip of the M&Cs performing this song to an enthusiastic crowd can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hX3L6rOHTA>

with the preppy heterosexual student kissing the popular lesbian rugby player, again to wild and raucous applause. This performance embodies the prevalence of queer life on campus in general, the passionate cult of queer rugby player worship in particular, and the possibilities for sexual fluidity among students.

The continual incorporation of queer themes by students into campus dances, concerts, and theatrical skits takes on the quality of ritual, in which, as scholar Kathleen Manning puts it, “ideas conflicting with the belief structure can be denied while the ideals acceptable to the community are lauded” (Manning, 120). In this case, students laud the normalization, acceptance, and celebration of same-sex desire and love, while homophobia is seen as a foreign entity to campus when it is acknowledged at all. The status of homophobia not only as a foreign entity but as something that must be *expelled* from campus is demonstrated in the 2007 protest at Smith in which an anti-gay speaker, invited by the leader of the Smith Republicans, met with such resistance from students on campus that he was unable to give the entirety of his speech and vacated the campus amid a crowd of dancing “Smithies” banging pots and chanting, “We’re here, we’re queer, get USED TO IT!” in the campus library.⁴ While several debates ensued on campus about the appropriateness of this response and rights to free speech versus the right to have a hate-free campus, the success of this protest speaks volumes about the desire among students to preserve Smith as a queer-affirming space. In addition, the fact that the same speaker had previously contacted the Mount Holyoke Republicans to

⁴ A brief video clip of the chanting at this event can be found at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EK4dbHNbgBo>

lecture on campus but was turned down by the group raises important questions about possible differences in the political philosophy of the two campus conservative groups, marginal though they both are.

Based on my own experience as a recent alumna of Mount Holyoke as well as preliminary interviews with current Mount Holyoke students, it becomes clear that the queer-saturated environment at colleges such as Mount Holyoke and Smith complicate the traditional narrative, often based on the experiences of gay men, that sexuality is necessarily always biologically pre-ordained and/or firmly established at an early age. If anything, the immense popularity of same-sex desire at these campuses points to a diverse range of potential sexualities, from queer students who applied to the Seven Sisters based on their queer-friendly reputations to previously heterosexual-identified students who came to these campuses for other reasons and then began to identify as queer once setting foot on campus. This latter argument, that a heterosexually-identified young woman can indeed “become queer” at her women’s college, is a highly controversial assertion given that it has usually been argued in a negative context as a reason why parents should forbid their daughters from attending a women’s college, rather than in an embracing and celebratory way, as I am doing here. Further, while the “queer border wars” between who is “authentically” queer versus who is just a “LUG,” or “lesbian until graduation,” has been a topic of contention for at least a few decades, what I am interested in is the *opening up* of possibilities for the normalization and celebration of same-sex desire that occurs in numerous ways during a student’s four years at one of these campuses.

What is the significance of these examples in arguing for a progressive queer politics? Firstly, these campuses illustrate the potential of being able to forge a queer identity not in a cauldron of fear, hatred, and self-loathing, but in the context of a normalized, popular, and celebratory space that largely acts as a “bubble” from the hostile, homophobic outside world. For the students involved in these communities, the emotional sustenance often gained by belonging to these queer spaces is immeasurable, including the sustenance to face life *outside* the college gates as strong queer women upon graduation. The strengthening of queer identities in these spaces has hardly been touched upon in any scholarship, while most popular discourses either demonize women’s colleges for their queerness or downplay the level of same-sex desire fostered in order to calm heterosexual panic.

Secondly, these spaces give us a great deal of insight into how women’s sexual fluidity, explored by scholars such as Lisa Diamond, may operate in such an unfettered and celebratory atmosphere. Our lack of opportunity to analyze the creation of queer identities outside immediately hostile spaces is often taken for granted, with perhaps the exceptions of “gay ghettos” such as the Castro district of San Francisco. Women’s colleges are unique in their sexual cultures, however, in that they both attract queer students, as the Castro would attract gay men, but that we see a great deal of fluctuation, expansiveness, and shifting of sexual identities from women who might not have considered themselves queer upon arrival and who did not enroll for reasons related to same-sex desire.

As I go forward with my research concerning both the historical development and contemporary popularity of queerness at the Seven Sisters

campuses, I will be exploring the concept of the Seven Sisters women's college not as a community that provides a queer safe space somewhere within its gates, but as a community which *is* a queer safe space by the structural incorporation of queerness into everyday experiences and events. The role of the administration may complicate this to varying degrees, specifically regarding Smith's attempts at distancing itself from lesbianism as well as women's colleges' non-engagement with the experiences of transgender students in general, which I will be exploring more in-depth in my project. Overall, however, these campuses remain fruitful sites for further inquiry into concrete communities embracing sexual fluidity and queer positivity.

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