

What's in a Word: The Disaccord of Dykes

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I often think back to my junior year of high school. I had a boyfriend at the time, trying to convince myself that my string of short-lived relationships was due to my busy schedule and not because boys just didn't interest me as much as I was told they should. I sat in my sociology class and listened to one of my peers equate a woman wearing men's clothes to a "dyke." Some other classmates quickly told her that she shouldn't say that word, and then we moved on with that day's lesson plans. At the time, I didn't fully understand why her words hurt me as much as they did, and I definitely didn't realize that it would be the beginning of a tough personal relationship with the word.

Dykes can be ditches. Dykes can be old Scottish walls (Oxford). Dyke is even a town in Virginia (County). But to me, and many others, the word "dyke" is a slur. The word first became a part of people's vocabularies in the US in the early 20th century. Dykes are lesbians, typically the ones that are more masculine presenting (Oxford). Like all the slurs that have been used to hurt Queer and Trans people, the word "dyke" used to be fairly common. Lesbians are working hard to reclaim the words that were once used against us, but it is a long battle.

One of the biggest struggles with the word is that many of us don't even feel comfortable saying or talking about it. How do you reclaim a word that has over a century-long history of homophobia and misogyny? How do you say it proudly without thinking of all the pain that your community has endured? For some, that history and great weight is what gives them power and the confidence to own this complicated word. For Gloria Bates, the word "dyke" describes more than sexuality. They say, "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." They then go on to explain that being a dyke has a far deeper meaning and that being a dyke is not the same as being a lesbian (Bates). Personally, I like the idea of having a word that describes my gender identity more specifically, but at the same time I fear that it may muddy the water even more. I also don't completely agree with the differentiation between dykes and lesbians. For one, I'm not entirely sure that I feel comfortable with non-lesbians identifying with a word that has historically been used as a slur towards lesbians. In addition, the lesbian community is already so small and often isolated, and I do not think that separating ourselves even more will do us any good.

Author Julia Penelope shared a similar view to my own, unlike Bates. Penelope lived in a time where the reclamation of terms like "butch" and "femme" began, and she saw the way that it fractured our already fragile community. People got so caught up in placing themselves in subgroups, and the dissonance it caused led them farther from where they wanted to be. She says, "But here we are glibly talking about 'reclaiming our past' when many of us aren't even dead yet! *Whose* past are we 'reclaiming?'" (Penelope 12). I think Penelope's point of view is incredibly relevant when talking about how it can be difficult to reclaim a word that is still so fresh in our minds. How can we say that we are reclaiming the past when the exact same pain exists in our present?

The discourse surrounding the use of “dyke” is something that exists in the back of my head more often than not. There are moments that it feels liberating, and moments that feel artificial and ingenuine. I think it’s important for lesbians to understand our history and to be proud of how far we have come, but I cannot help but be a little weary of the conflict, internal and external, that it causes. Honestly, I do not have much of a solution. Coming to terms with my sexuality was a long process and it is still something that I struggle to be proud of sometimes. Calling myself a “dyke” is probably a little too intense for me right now, but maybe one day the meaning will truly change, and it can be something that I take pride in.

Works Cited

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