ETHICS AND IDENTITY:
EXAMINING THE PHENOMENON OF LESBIAN LATENESS

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When examining LGB+ communities, there is a concerning trend to be noted in lesbians, who statistically come out later in life than their gay and bisexual cohorts.\(^1\) Along with the phenomena of simply coming out later, many lesbians display a tendency to engage in sexual and romantic relationships with men for long periods of time before coming to the epiphany that they are, in fact, lesbians.\(^2\) With lesbians being highly under researched and underrepresented, current discourse within the lesbian community tries to give concrete answers in an attempt to make sense of these truths. In this paper, I will argue that distinct differences in ethical concepts upheld by patriarchal society versus those upheld by lesbian society possess explanatory power when assessing why it is the case that lesbians tend to come out later in life than other LGB+ persons.

To defend this claim of mine, I would like to first begin by providing a bit of background information about the subject in question, as to enhance the reader’s general understanding of the issue my thesis attempts to explain. To begin this survey of introductory information, I would like to note that empirical data confirms that lesbians experience various sexual identity milestones later in life than individuals who identify as gay or bisexual.\(^3\),\(^4\) Various sexual identity milestones are what make up the colloquial process of “coming out.” Relevant milestones most commonly include the age at which one first considers that one might be homosexual, the age at which one is completely certain of one’s sexuality, and finally, the age at which one formally comes out to another individual. In all such aforementioned milestones,

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\(^2\)  This incidence is so common that there is in fact a term for individuals who never have relations with men, known as “Gold Star Lesbians.” This term itself receives much backlash from the community, who reject it, among other reasons, because simply not that many lesbians can call themselves “Gold Stars.” Example at https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/09/gold-star-lesbian-platinum-gay/.

\(^3\)  “A Survey of LGBT Americans.” Pew Research Center

lesbians statistically lag behind gay men and bisexuals, sometimes taking many years to hit the same marks, on average.\(^5\)

This trend of “lesbian lateness”\(^6\) is concerning for a number of reasons, considering the fact that reaching sexual identity milestones has an impact on the overall well-being of LGB+ individuals in a multitude of ways. For example, figures indicate that individuals who hit milestones earlier in life remain more likely to have higher self-esteem, while individuals who hit milestones later were more likely to struggle with issues such as internalized homophobia, a mental state marked by some level of one’s rejection of one’s own sexual identity.\(^7\) On top of this, the rate of suicide attempts for LGB youth is five times the rate of suicide attempts for heterosexual youth, although this rate is drastically decreased for LGB individuals who are able to come out in safe environments.\(^8\) Considering the vast number of negative effects brought on by coming out late, it seems to logically follow that there is reason to find concern in the fact that lesbians are facing harm because of this phenomenon.

While the statistics on lesbian lateness remain worrying, little academic work on the issue exists, or at the very least, is readily available.\(^9\) A basic Google search of something along the lines of “Why do so many lesbians come out later in life?” Yields very few academic results—

\(^5\) One cited study specifically explored the intersectionality of race and sexual identity (Citation 4) finding that sexual milestones for certain orientations could sometimes be better classified among racial or ethnic lines, instead of defined by orientation. For example, Latin@ individuals of any orientation tended to hit the first sexual identity milestone sooner than their cohorts. This expanded set of data yields slightly different results than data that simply analyzed sexual identity. However, racial or ethnic differences remain beyond the scope of the paper, and general trends based around individual sexual orientations will be used and analyzed instead.

\(^6\) I would like to coin this phrase to describe the trend of lesbians coming out later in life than their cohorts. The existing phrase “later-in-life lesbians” tends to lend itself to much older women coming out, and I would like to focus on general trends of lesbians of all ages coming out later than bisexuals and gay men.

\(^7\) Martos, “Variations.” 24-33

\(^8\) Center for Disease Control. Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016

\(^9\) My lived experience as a lesbian, living in a lesbian community is what first provided me with this insight.
although a staggering number of think-pieces and interviews written by or conducted with lesbians who realized their homosexuality at a later age do appear.

For example, the first of such results produces an article by The Guardian which details the late-in-life coming out experience of Elizabeth Gilbert, a critically acclaimed author who came to the reality of her sexuality in her 40s.\textsuperscript{10} On top of Gilbert’s experience, the piece also notes the experiences of actress Portia de Rossi, who had once been married to a man before marrying Ellen DeGeneres, as well as those of actress and politician Cynthia Nixon, who had been with a man for 15 years before marrying her wife, and reporter Mary Portas, who was married with children for 14 years before leaving her husband and marrying a woman. These high-profile cases are not entirely unique, and they serve to paint a very real image of the crisis of lesbian lateness.

To provide additional empirical support regarding lesbian lateness, Ruth Hunt, the head of Stonewall, a UK based LGBT organization, states that lesbians coming out later in their lives is not a new phenomenon;\textsuperscript{11} And despite this phenomenon being recorded time and time again throughout history\textsuperscript{12}, the body of work dedicating to providing answers (and thereby solutions) as to why such a thing happens remains minute. Google aside, even search engines such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, which are made to yield fine-tuned results of a strictly academic nature fail to retrieve any relevant work focused on providing answers for this phenomenon. It is from this absence of relevant work seeking to explain the phenomenon of lesbian lateness that I form the belief that there is possibly more at work than a simple lack of interest in research. It is

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{12} Brekke, Kira and Brooke Soplesa. “11 Lesbians In History You Don’t Know But Should.” Huffington Post. \url{https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lesbians-to-know-in-history_n_561d5928e4b028dd7ea5699b}
through this, that I take the position that a possible reason for lesbian lateness is a difference in ethical landscapes when comparing lesbian and non-lesbian communities. The ethical landscape of non-lesbian communities functions as an oppressive structure that devalues the lesbian experience, as I aim to prove in this paper through a critical discussion of various ethical theories. Before exploring this line of thought deeper however, it is important to flesh out a few more details about lesbian existence.

Beyond the lack of scholarship on the life experiences of lesbians, there is divided discourse within the lesbian community that centers on who counts and who does not count as a lesbian. Some individuals argue that a lesbian is simply a woman who engages in sexual or romantic relationships with other women and only women, while others choose to define a lesbian as any individual who defines themselves as a non-man, who engages in sexual or romantic relationships with other non-men. While it is not my intention to choose sides and bring forth additional issues of an ontological nature, for the purposes of clarity in this paper, a lesbian will henceforth be defined as a woman who engages in sexual or romantic relationships only with other women, and chooses to take on the identity of “lesbian.” For purposes of this paper, a lesbian will not count as a woman who will later come out in life, as they do not functionally exist as part of lesbian communities in their current state. Additionally, a lesbian may be cisgender, transgender, or non-binary. Conceptualizing lesbian existence in this manner is inclusive of the diversity of lesbian communities, while making clear that a lack of maleness is a key feature of lesbian existence, to be explored later as a pivotal reason as to why lesbian women tend to come out later in life.

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13 An individual who identifies with being cisgender identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. An individual who is transgender does not identify the gender they were assigned at birth, and may or may not also be an identity taken on by an individual who is non-binary, meaning an individual whose gender does not necessarily fit into male or female categories.
Aside from ontological debates within the lesbian community, there is also the issue of lesbian separatism that exists within the academic lesbian community. Insofar as lesbians and lesbian issues remain under-researched in academia, notable lesbian scholars such as Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Claudia Card are particularly interested in upholding a sort of theoretical separatism, which is important to emphasize and have awareness of as prolegomena to further lesbian discourse. As theoretical separatists, lesbian thinkers are particularly interested in having their work stand out as its own unique genre, instead of leaving it to get lost among other similar but not congruent fields, such as feminist or queer theory.

To further explain, while it is the case that womanhood and queerness may find themselves a place within lesbianism, the large body of feminist theory focuses on the liberation of the heterosexual woman (notable example: Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*) and tends to leave lesbian women in an odd place.\(^\text{14}\) Conversely, the breadth of queer theory is so massive that it swallows lesbian issues whole – after all, lesbians are the smallest sexual minority, with 1.1% of Americans identifying as such.\(^\text{15}\) Queer theory, while not to imply that the field is without merit, functions as a sort of echo chamber. Lesbian issues are not the same as Gay issues. Lesbian identities, voices, and experiences are all radically distinct, and it remains problematic to view them as equivalent simply because theories surrounding both groups can be labeled as some sort of “queer theory.” Intersectionality certainly exists within the aforementioned groups, and yet the best way to synthesize theories regarding each is to take up the notion that they are all ideologically distinct.


It is through an understanding of all of the aforementioned idiosyncrasies of lesbian communities and scholarship that one can begin to conceptualize the clear difficulty that lesbian individuals face in attempts to actualize their identity in the existing framework of patriarchal duty-law ethics. With a baseline understanding of relevant background information set, I would like to move forward into support and critical discussion of my argument.

I will describe and defend my argument in two parts. To do so, I will first attempt to prove the existence of a patriarchal duty-law ethical system present in lay society, claiming that the existence of this pervasive and oppressive system has some explanatory power when attempting to ascertain why lesbian lateness occurs, as it restricts access to lesbian ethical systems and communities. Second, I will then attempt to prove the existence of this distinctive lesbian ethical system. From this, I will extrapolate my final line of thought, that the overall differences between lesbian and duty-law ethical systems offers a possible explanation to lesbian lateness. I will then seek to defend my overall argument from potential criticisms.

With intention to prove the first part of my argument, I turn to thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Virginia Held, and Adrienne Rich, who theorize both that the current societal ethical system is oppressive, and that it has negative effects on would-be defectors that may prevent their movement to more attractive modes of existence. Foucault and Held provide an argument that I believe makes compelling proof of the existence of a duty-law ethical system, while Rich provides arguments for the patriarchal aspect of this ethical system. I believe that the theories of Foucault, Held, and Rich all complement each other, and that they may be pieced together to illustrate a bigger picture idea of how patriarchal duty-law functions. Then, to support the second part of my argument, I borrow from the work of thinkers such as Sarah Hoagland and Claudia Card. Hoagland fleshes out what she believes to be a distinct system of lesbian ethics, a brand of
care ethics, and Card will be used to further detail lesbian ethics and how it functions. An understanding of the ethical system that exists in lesbian communities as described by Hoagland and Card, paired with an understanding of the patriarchal duty-law ethical system existing in lay society as told by Foucault, Held, and Rich, will then come together to finalize my argument, that differences between these ethical systems provide explanations for the existence of the phenomenon of lesbian lateness.

With the introduction to lesbian discourse set, I would like to begin with the first part of my argument, where I take up the position that the existence of a patriarchal duty-law (PDL) society is the largest and most powerful structure lesbians must subvert in order to exist as lesbians. I would like to coin the term “patriarchal duty-law” to describe the manner in which society traditionally functions: rooted in male power, with ethical choices being motivated by duty and enforced by societal structure. I will provide support for this claim below.

The term “patriarchy” may bear a multiplicity of definitions insofar as use of the term for a variety of disciplines exists. For example, Gerda Lerner, a feminist theorist and historian, describes in her work *The Creation of Patriarchy* that the system of the patriarchy is cyclical, encompassing male control over female bodies and sexuality. Other feminist thinkers assess patriarchy with a finer lens, as an intersectional institution that works with other oppressive forces to gain total control of women. Marxist-feminists such as Iris Young take the position that capitalism and patriarchy are intimately linked, which then causes the total oppression of the female body. In contrast, black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde claims that it is the intersection of

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16 Abbreviated here forth for ease.
racism and patriarchy that link together to explain the complete and total oppression of women.\textsuperscript{19} Acknowledging all of these variations of thought in \textit{The Creation of Patriarchy}, Lerner ultimately concludes that patriarchy at the very least is socially constructed and rendered as a natural occurrence.\textsuperscript{20}

It follows that patriarchy endows men with primary power in all facets of society, including those which are political, social, economic, and moral – nearly 100\% of all societies globally function within a patriarchal structure, for example.\textsuperscript{21} Because power lies in male interests under a patriarchal society, modalities of being that do not intersect with the dominant male desire are discarded, as argued by feminist theorists. Aptly, a claim can be made that one such group whose being is at issue with the patriarchy is lesbians. It is my claim that a group of individuals whose lives remain so wholly unconcerned with maleness stands clearly as a target under a dominant, male-centered landscape.

To further explain, of lesbians and the patriarchy, lesbian scholar Marilyn Frye writes that a facet of patriarchal institution means that “Males must have access to women. It is the Patriarchal Imperative… Female denial of male access to females substantially cuts off a flow of benefits, but it has also the form and full portent of assumption of power.”\textsuperscript{22} It is again clear through Frye’s supposition that one of the primary goals of the patriarchy is to secure access to women in a manner that predicates control over female corporeal existence and comportment. From this, I believe it can be drawn that lesbian existence is especially at issue with patriarchal values. As the lesbian life necessitates freeing oneself from structural male imposition, the

\textsuperscript{20} Lerner, \textit{Patriarchy}.
patriarchy works to reverse such desire in an effort to retain its hold over the female. Being such, I would like to argue that the upholding of a PDL ethical framework works to erase the concept of lesbianism, which I believe may offer a possible answer as to why lesbian lateness occurs.

I argue that the ethical landscape of PDL functions as deontological in nature, encouraging individuals to complete actions based on obligations they have, and tends to punish individuals who do not complete these duty-bound obligations. Duties in a PDL ethical system are importantly bore in accordance with heterosexual norms, as I intend to prove through the first section of this paper. Removed then, from specific duties is the concept of individual desire, which describes how individuals may want certain somethings to occur. As they encompass a role removed from duty, individual desires then left become sanctioned as legitimate or illegitimate based on these aforementioned heterosexual norms. It may be the case that some individual desires are compatible with one’s prescribed ethical duty in a PDL framework, while others are not.

To create a broad example to clarify this concept, a man and a woman who engage sexually or romantically with one another have their desires sanctioned as legitimate under a PDL ethical framework. In contrast however, a woman who simply finds herself sexually involved with another woman has her desires sanctioned as illegitimate, and exists in complete rejection of this system. To be a lesbian is to exist beyond transgression of the norm – as the norm has no place for lesbian existence altogether. I believe that this creates a clear issue for

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23 I claim that PDL ethical landscapes are deontological insofar as their function is predicated on duty and obligation  
24 I intend to provide support for this claim in the main body of my paper, using Michel Foucault’s theory of the Panopticon, Virginia Held’s Network theory, and Adrienne Rich’s theory of Compulsory Heterosexuality.  
26 Obviously barring any extreme situation, engaging in heterosexual behavior is arguably never frowned upon.
lesbian existence, and offers a possible explanation for the occurrence of lesbian lateness, as I will describe in detail throughout this work.

While prima facie it may not seem entirely apparent that structures of duty-law bind individuals in similar ways to classic judicial laws, duty-laws may in fact have a stronger hold over individuals in some cases, as punishment for resisting the ethical norm has the ability to manifest itself as social, political, or economic punishment. When considering this, it seems more apparent why individuals may not have the ability or the drive to defect from their place in society, if this ability is even a possibility they are made aware of. I find that Michel Foucault’s theory of the panopticon first provides a convincing argument in support of this thought.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault notably describes the disciplinary structure of panopticism, a concept that works to explain the way in which individuals in a duty-law type society become self-policing and self-surveying in an attempt to avoid the punishment that would otherwise come from falling out of line with the rules in front of a surveilling agent, whether or not such a surveilling agent is actually watching.27

The concept of the panopticon was first developed by the 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham’s panopticon was originally described as an actual building, circular in shape, and equipped with an observation tower running through the center, with the main body of the building being occupied by a variety of individuals. The panopticon was to be designed in such a manner that individuals were not able to see one another, let alone have the ability to see what was going on in the observation tower, resulting in individuals in the panopticon being unaware of who was observing them or when. The theory to draw from this was that individuals would thus police themselves into perfect behavior out of fear of being caught doing the wrong

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thing at an inopportune time. While Bentham’s original theory was meant to serve as an example of a perfect disciplinary institution, such as a prison or school, Foucault pushes the notion that the physical panopticon may provide insight into how society actually operates at large.

To expand, Foucault believes that ‘discipline’ as a concept embodies a certain type of power, whether or not this discipline is aligned with a specific institution or tool. This means that for Foucault, societal domination does not require any real, tangible surveillance, it is simply the pervasive threat of a possibility of surveillance that convinces individuals to conform to the body of ethical norms that are handed down.

Foucault describes this by giving the scenario of a 17th century town dealing with the emergence of the bubonic plague. Foucault writes that the fear of the plague forces residents to remain confined to their homes, as the alternative is to face certain death. The only individuals permitted out of their homes are appointed guards, who are put in place to ensure that everyone remains indoors as instructed, so the plague is not able to spread. Foucault goes on to illustrate that these guards, besides patrolling the streets, must visit every home on their assigned street, and force residents to appear at their windows so that the guards may check that they have not become infected with the plague. Foucault makes the claim that this example marks the first of a pure, “disciplined society.” This thought comes from the notion that, even though surveillance is not constantly watching individual motion, that surveilling bodies could have the ability to observe individual motion at any moment, without warning. As Foucault believes this is the first

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29 Foucault, *Discipline*, 215
30 *Ibid*, 195
31 *Ibid*, 198
example of a disciplined society operating under a panoptic system, it is certainly not the only example of such.

There exist a plethora of panoptic systems in current use in modern societies that arguably function as a sort of invisible surveillance in the same manner Foucault describes, encouraging individuals to act within certain predetermined boundaries out of duty. The advent of social media, for example, functions as a panoptic system present in most developed societies. Individuals, whether conscious or not, police themselves and the image of themselves present in social media on multiple levels, for fear of a multiplicity of reasons. Individuals might for example engage in self-policing behavior on social media to uphold their image in a manner that keeps them out of certain types of trouble, whether it be from possibly alienating a future employer, to maintaining a specific social image for a mass of followers – or hiding one’s sexuality for fear of the punishment that may result from revealing it publicly.

It becomes clear through this that panopticism serves to demonstrate the pervasiveness and widespread circulation of ethical norms that invoke a dipartite back-and-forth of individual self-policing, as well as policing by others. Foucault believes that panoptic societies incentivize individual self-policing and the policing of others specifically by providing punishment in response to failure. The key issue then with panoptic societies, is that the ethical norms being upheld are oftentimes so ingrained that it is a difficult task for an individual to recognize that the possibility of alternative structures may even exist.

For the lesbian, it becomes easy to see how panopticism embodies a specific harm – insofar as one exists in a society where lesbianism is clearly discouraged and even punished, one may begin to self-policing oneself in order to avoid being caught defecting and therefore punished. Perhaps more clearly described by Bentham’s physical panopticon, individuals living within the
panoptic structure fail to rationally consider their own wants, needs, or desires because they remain too engulfed in the fear of what will happen if they are caught acting in a manner unsanctioned by the panoptic observer.

I believe that this seems particularly difficult for lesbians for two reasons. First, for a lesbian to actualize her identity, it seems, based on our aforementioned sexual identity milestones, that she must first begin to consider that she may not be heterosexual before she may even decide to come out. Based on the strict and duty-bound nature of the panopticon as described by Bentham and Foucault, it seems that it may be said that information about lesbianism may be hard to come by, as it so clearly exists in direct subversion to the prescribed ethical norms that the panoptic society works so hard to enforce.

If we are to imagine however, that a would-be lesbian is able to reach information about lesbianism which leads her to begin to reconsider her heterosexuality, there is still a second issue at hand that seems to provide evidence that panopticism is harmful to lesbian existence; that a woman has to actually come-out to fully actualize her existence as a lesbian. Insofar as gaining access to material that provides insight into the possibility of lesbianism is difficult under this ethical framework, it follows that acting and living as a lesbian under this ethical framework is just as, if not more difficult. To exist as a lesbian under a panoptic society means to constantly exist in the scrutinous eye of the other individuals who engage in policing behavior, even if one is able to break free from the binding of self-policing. It seems hard to argue that any individual would desire to make themselves a target of societal punishment, as defectors of duty-law are seemingly destined to become. As such, it seems entirely plausible that this system of mass surveillance and punishment acts as a barrier to lesbian actualization.

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32 Martos, *Variations* 24-33
In summation, I believe that panopticism is one theory that provides compelling support for my paper’s claim, as I believe it proves that an overarching system of duty and punishment are present in society, and that this system has clear detrimental effects on individuals whose existence are (or would be) at odds with the norm. I believe that further support for Foucault’s claims is mirrored from a specifically feminist point of view in Virginia Held’s *The Ethics of Care*. Held holds a similar viewpoint in relation to that of Foucault, maintaining that the societal ethical duties handed down to an individual have very strong effects on the actions of one. Both of these theories work to importantly suggest that there is indeed a duty-law mechanism in which society generally functions under, which aids my argument.

In *The Ethics of Care*, Virginia Held sketches out a way of thinking about how general duty-law society functions. For Held, the key concept is “networks.” From the moment an individual is born, argues Held, one is “enmeshed” in a given social network-like system. Held importantly states of networks, that they “constitute our identity,” and “That we can think and act as if we are independent depends on a network of social relations making it possible for us to do so.” Held clearly believes that networks have a strong hold on one’s ability to act autonomously, because the essence of individuality for Held is to exist in satisfaction within a network.

Although similar to Foucault, Held believes that individuals are duty-bound to others in some sense, Held does not seem to explicitly think that these networks have to be necessarily oppressive, especially at the same societal level as Foucault describes. For example, Held considers the network of a parent and child. This union is undoubtedly held together by duty, just as in Foucault’s view, and yet it is very easy to imagine an infinite number of scenarios in which

34 Ibid, 14
this particular network functions as healthy or beneficial for the individual. Held’s system of networks additionally seem to be more personal and less overarching than Foucault’s conception of the same system. Held pushes forth the idea that individuals exist within a multiplicity of networks, simply defined by our social relations, while Foucault takes the position that something like a network would have to be an overarching societal ethical binding. Despite these differences in thought, I believe that these theories are both compatible in describing the existence of a duty-law society which may have clear effects on the coming-out patterns of lesbians.

To expand more on Held’s theory, Held believes that all individuals are actors in some number of various networks. These networks, she argues, are comprised of other individuals that one interacts with, and lack some degree of autonomy, as individuals remain bound to these networks via a sense of duty to the other individuals it is composed of. To this sentiment, Held makes the following claim “[there is an] illusion that society is composed of free, equal, and independent individuals who can choose to associate with one another or not. It obscures the very real facts of dependency for everyone…”35 Through this, Held takes the position that individuals generally must maintain the networks they hold for their entire lives. Held additionally posits that escaping a given network requires both incredible effort and knowledge.36 This supposition is first part of why Held seems to believe that these networks must be maintained in the most basic sense of duty. I also believe that this claim of Held’s is congruent to similar thought explored in Foucault’s panopticon. It is clear that both thinkers believe that these structures of duty are binding, and also work to obfuscate alternative ethical

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35 Ibid, 14
36 Ibid, 14
structures insofar as they require individuals to act dutifully within the system they already exist within, as I will explore further.

Furthermore, I believe that networks are important for Held’s conception of duty-law because networks themselves have the ability to enforce duty-law as they hold individuals accountable to performing certain actions, as one can imagine that the repercussions to performing unapproved action often lead to some level of ostracism within one’s network. For example, a woman might desire to not shave her legs, as she finds it time consuming, costly, and painful. Most women however, do shave their legs, and thus a woman dutifully bound to her networks, although quite possibly dissatisfied with having to shave her legs, will continue to shave them nonetheless because it is what is expected of her. A woman who resists the duty of performing femininity in the relevant way may become the subject of ostracism from friends, coworkers, or even family members. There is a beauty standard of having shaved legs that is handed down by the patriarchy, expected to be upheld by women, and enforced via duty-law.

Held and Foucault thus work to show that duty-law makes it difficult for individuals to act in ways that they so desire, and yet perhaps the most sinister function of duty-law is its ability to obfuscate knowledge of just what it is that one desires. To embellish this thought more, while it is certainly not difficult to imagine the case of a woman who is conscious of her dislike for the institution of shaving, it could be argued that there would be many more women who would claim a dislike for shaving if they were so afforded the ability to do so. Some behaviors enforced by duty-law seem to have a tendency to become second nature, to the point where an individual carrying out a particular behavior is not even thinking about what they are doing. Many women shave their legs without putting much thought into the action, they simply know that shaving
their legs is habitual, and often do not stop to consider how they might actually feel about it or the norms that govern such behavior.

While the leg-shaving debacle is certainly not one of life or death, this phenomenon in general remains a dangerous function of duty-law because it works to police individuals into behaving in a certain manner without even making said individuals aware of their being policed, again just as the panopticon works for Foucault. The duty-law ethical system of a society is able to exert some level of control over individuals without even having to do the bulk of the work, being the case that individuals begin to police themselves and one another under a duty-law system.

From this, it becomes clear that this function of duty-law ethics has an effect on lesbians in the same ways, contributing to them coming out later in life. Duty-law controls one’s experiences in the world, and also works to prevent individuals from gaining access to ways of being that are at issue with the norm. Heterosexuality functions as an organ of the patriarchy, and individuals who fall outside of the heterosexual norm can be met with everything from microaggressive behaviors to physical violence. Heterosexuality is undeniably not encouraged, or even promoted as something normal in lay society. Being such, individuals who would otherwise come out as lesbians have a remarkably difficult time making the choice to come out. It becomes clear how lesbians specifically become targeted under this ethical system.

On another note, for a woman to be a lesbian, she must have knowledge that she does not like men in the relevant manner. With consideration to the way PDL ethics function, even a woman who knows she does not feel pleased or contented in relationships with men may fail to immediately recognize that this hints at her being a homosexual.
Next, for lesbian women, there is also an issue of escaping the rigid duty-law network systems once one realizes that something is amiss. Held importantly says of networks that they “constitute our identity.”37 For Held, the very modality of womanhood is defined by relationships held with other individuals. A woman has to have access to materials that encourage, or even plainly discuss the option of lesbianism in her network to even be aware that there is an alternative. And a woman also has to be in a position where she can potentially leave her network. When society places emphasis on women behaving in a certain manner, and even coerces them into believing that they are content in harmful situations, it is indeed as difficult to escape as Held and Foucault would suggest.

It may be extremely difficult to separate oneself from the conventions one already knows, especially when the result of that may present one with danger, as I have shown through this analysis of Foucault’s panopticon and Held’s network theories. Lesbians are specifically affected by the conventions described by Held and Foucault in a manner that results in their coming out later, because the ethical landscapes described by the aforementioned both actively work to obfuscate the option of lesbianism, and outright discourage individuals who discover knowledge of lesbian ethics from pursuing lesbianism.

I believe that Foucault and Held provide clear evidence of the supposition that lay society embraces an ethical system based around duty-law. Despite this, I would like to acknowledge a few weaknesses that their theories share. For one, I believe it is a critical failure of both Held and Foucault that their theories lack to provide specific insight into the manner in which marginalized groups are more harshly affected by the systems they describe. There is no shortage of academic literature that supports the fact that marginalized individuals tend to face worse

37 Ibid, 14
persecution than their counterparts. I take the opinion that it seems shortsighted of Held and Foucault for their theories to not critically discuss this issue. In a similar vein, I believe that Foucault and Held’s failure to assess the intersection of the patriarchy and duty-law as prevailing oppressive societal structures is a weakness.

While I cannot deny that Held and Foucault’s arguments are weak in these ways which I hold important to understanding my overall argument, I don’t believe that this means that their theories are entirely invalid and unusable. I maintain that Held and Foucault continue to provide an excellent characterization of the manner in which a duty-law ethical system functions. I believe that the theories of Held and Foucault are especially useful when critically assessed alongside material that is notably radically lesbian feminist. In the next section of my paper, I will draw from lesbian thinker Adrienne Rich, to round out just this thought. I believe that the combination of thought provided by these three thinkers comes together to give a holistic view of how the ethical structure of society functions – as a system of patriarchal duty-law.

Lesbian thinker Adrienne Rich, in her work “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” argues for the harm of duty-law patriarchal ethics and outlines particular modes in which it affects women as a societal class, and thus lesbians, ultimately contributing to a possible reason as to why lesbians tend to come out later in life. Rich argues that all women, whether conscious of it are not, face oppression under this patriarchal mode of duty-law, although it is importantly lesbians who certainly face the most oppression. I find Rich’s view attractive, as her view of societal ethical practices falls in line to the same thought embraced by Held and

38 I am not necessarily trying to make an incredibly deep claim here, as that is not quite the focus of my paper. Common knowledge of issues such as the pay gap, the glass ceiling, institutional racism, etc. are sufficient to think on here.
Foucault, and yet Rich takes a specifically lesbian focus as she argues that the patriarchy is intimately linked to duty-law ethics.

To frame her position, Rich first makes the claim that individuals make a mistake when they assume homosexuality to be a choice while failing to consider that heterosexuality is indeed also a choice (albeit one prescribed by duty-law), calling heterosexuality, as an institution, a “beachhead of male dominance.” In this, Rich asserts that heterosexuality is an ethically obligatory behavior where the performance of heterosexuality works to upkeep patriarchal power structures. Through this assertion, Rich implores one to critically consider whether or not heterosexuality is truly one’s own preference, or actually a performance undertaken insofar as it is prescribed to one as an ethical imperative by the patriarchy.

For Rich, heterosexuality functions as duty-law itself in the patriarchal system, and is one of the first and most prominent ways in which male domination takes shape. There exists a multiplicity of ways in which individuals are bound to operating within heterosexuality, and a multiplicity of ways in which individuals receive punishment for gaining the power to subvert this binding, again a theme mirrored in Held and Foucault. Borrowing from Kathleen Gough’s essay “The Origin of the Family,” Rich notes “eight characteristics of male power” in a patriarchal ethics system, which outlines the way in which male power takes shape in a duty-law patriarchy. Rich expands upon Gough’s original set of ideas, detailing specifically just how these characteristics of male power work to harm women under duty-law, in ways both before or

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after they act as defectors to duty ethics. As told by Rich, the characteristics of male power are as follows:

1. To deny women [our own] sexuality: [punishment, including death, for lesbian sexuality; denial of maternal and postmenopausal sensuality; *pseudolesbian* images in media and literature; closing of archives and destruction of documents relating to lesbian existence]

2. Or to force it [male sexuality] upon them: [by means of rape (including marital rape); the socialization of women to feel that male sexual "drive" amounts to a right, idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising, etc.; pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message being that sadistic heterosexuality is more "normal" than sensuality between women)]

3. To command or exploit their labor to control their produce: [by means of the institutions of marriage and motherhood as unpaid production; the horizontal segregation of women in paid employment; the decoy of the upwardly mobile token woman]

4. To control or rob them of their children: [enforced sterilization; systematized infanticide; seizure of children from lesbian mothers by the courts]

5. To confine them physically and prevent their movement: [by means of rape as terrorism, keeping women off the streets; horizontal segregation of women in employment; prescriptions for "full-time" mothering; enforced economic dependence of wives]

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42 Rich’s characteristics have been edited and annotated for clarity and pertinence to this project.
6. To use them as objects in male transactions [use of women as "gifts"]

7. To cramp their creativeness: [definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female within any culture, so that cultural values become embodiment of male subjectivity; restriction of female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood; the social and economic disruption of women's creative aspirations; erasure of female tradition]

8. To withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments: [by means of non-education of females (60% of the world's illiterates are women); the "Great Silence" regarding women and particularly lesbian existence in history and culture;" sex-role stereotyping which deflects women from science, technology, and other "masculine" pursuits; male social/professional bonding which excludes women; discrimination against women in the professions]\(^{43,44}\)

Rich argues that, through this amalgamation of forces of male domination in PDL society, women remain thus “convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives.”\(^{45}\) The end result of these forces coming together and operating as such is effectively what Rich coins as compulsory heterosexuality – a violent institution of required subjugation of female corporeality that continues to be upheld via a duty-law ethical landscape.

To offer a tangible example of the sort of thing that Rich begins to dive in to, relationships portrayed in the media between men and women often seem strained at best. There is a classic trope on many popular family sitcoms where a family is headed by a husband who is

\(^{43}\) Rich, *Blood*, 638  
\(^{44}\) It is necessary for comprehensibility to expand on Rich’s original sentiments. My comments can be found after the brackets.  
\(^{45}\) Rich, *Blood*, 640
almost always lazy, homely, unappreciative, unromantic, and dull-witted, and a wife, who is almost always too good looking for the husband, and does all the cooking, cleaning, and raising of the children. The couple in this trope is always at odds with each other, and never seems to represent a relationship that is happy or healthy. With images like this being repeated over and over again in media, it seems like it is almost the case that women should come to expect feelings of dissatisfaction and lack of interest in their male counterparts.

When most women pick up these messages of normalized dissatisfaction in their relationships with men, and when these messages are so heavily replicated and broadcast to society at large, they become norms that duty-law enforces. There is no societal message that encourages women to look for satisfaction, and there is certainly no societal message that tells women to consider looking for satisfaction in other women if it cannot be found in men. It is clear that one manner in which duty-law works to keep lesbians from coming out sooner in life is first by placing women’s satisfaction on the backburner, or by hiding simple knowledge of an issue. While this may not be the most severe problem in the world, it constitutes a problem of what Rich refers to as compulsory heterosexuality.

While all women are certainly negatively affected by this oppression, it is lesbian women who are affected the most severely under compulsory heterosexuality. This is because, for Rich, lesbian existence is defined by radical resistance to this institution of compulsory heterosexuality;\(^\text{46}\) Effectively meaning that lesbians who remain closeted, or who otherwise cannot resist in the relevant way, are suffering in some extra mode that is not felt by non-lesbian women. This is because heterosexual women, while they may be stifled and unsatisfied (or not, heterosexual women may be perfectly contented with these institutions) do not have their

\(^{46}\) \textit{Ibid}, 641
identities constituted by their resistance to a system that oppresses them. A lesbian is not a lesbian insofar as she is a woman contentedly living a life with a man. A lesbian is only a lesbian as she resists such a way of being.\textsuperscript{47} Rich notes that “Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance.”\textsuperscript{48}

In further analyzing the list provided by Gough and Rich, there is a material perspective\textsuperscript{49} to be gained on the trend of lesbian lateness, which explains the harm of duty-law patriarchy on the coming out experience of lesbians. While I have the view that all of Rich’s characteristics have merit, I believe that characteristics one and two possess the most explanatory power when trying to understand material lesbian lateness specifically, which I will address below.

To begin, characteristic one makes the claim that women are denied exploration of their sexuality under PDL ethics, in ways that include everything from obfuscation of basic knowledge of alternatives to heterosexuality, to the punishment of death handed down to women who do eventually gain the ability to explore these aforementioned alternatives.\textsuperscript{50} As seen replicated in Foucault and Held, there is societal control of the lesbian. Lesbian lateness can be drawn from this premise as an issue, because there is simply no way in which lesbians may gain easy access to information – it is not the ethical imperative of PDL society to foster lesbianism.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 640
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 649
\textsuperscript{49} A materialist perspective is to be understood as a perspective which refers to an approach to understanding social life that rests on the idea that production and reproduction are fundamental social processes that greatly influence, if not determine, the basic character of social systems and the patterns of life associated with them.
\textsuperscript{50} Rich, \textit{Blood}, 638
\end{flushleft}
Living in a society of privilege it is easy to forget that nearly half of the countries in the world criminalize lesbianism, with 12 countries making it a crime punishable by death.\textsuperscript{51} Even where being a lesbian isn’t exactly a crime in and of itself, only 5 out of the 193 countries in the world guarantee equal rights to lesbian individuals (The United States is not included in this list, for reference.)\textsuperscript{52} This serves as an example to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality as an ethical norm in lay society. As ethical landscapes work to restrict protections for lesbians and to keep women bound to their duties, there is certainly a possible contribution to lesbian lateness to be gathered.

Moving forth, the aforementioned characteristic then directly ties into number two, which then asserts that male sexuality is forced onto women. As women are taught to ignore their own possible romantic and sexual desires, they are also simultaneously taught at an early age to accept the sexual desires of men as their own, without question. These characteristics detail a vicious circle of female entrapment where men dictate what female sexuality is and how it should function, and women are largely prevented from even accessing information which encourages them to consider otherwise.

Albeit a risqué example, this characteristic is especially noticeable when considering how even heterosexual women experience sexual pleasure. Heterosexual women, by an extremely large gap, experience orgasm during sex far less than any other demographic.\textsuperscript{53} While there are a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{53} Hosie, Rachel. “Heterosexual women orgasm less than any other demographic when having sex, study says.” Independent. \url{https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/heterosexual-women-orgasm-sex-less-other-demographics-lgbt-lesbian-gay-study-chapman-indiana-a7595181.html} (Accessed March 8, 2019)
\end{thebibliography}
number of factors beyond the scope of this paper that may serve as possible contributors to this occurrence, the fact is that this occurrence shows concretely that there is an imperative for women to ignore or sublimate romantic and sexual desires, especially considering that men who have heterosexual sex with women report experiencing orgasm upwards of 90% of the time.\textsuperscript{54}

In a PDL ethical landscape where women are conditioned to accept this difference in treatment as appropriate, it becomes clear that besides a lack of sexual satisfaction with individuals one is actually sexually attracted to, there is quite possibly also a lack of realization that one may not actually be sexually attracted to a sexual partner at all, because it is a quite normal experience in even heterosexual encounters to not experience an orgasm, an important form of sexual satisfaction. This, in turn, may have particularly insidious effects on lesbian women who are not afforded the freedom to explore their true sexual desires given the ethical landscape of PDL society. The simple fact is that women who are not given freedom to express their likes or dislikes may not come out for long periods of time, thus lending explanatory power to this speculation.

Rich additionally notes that “There is no statistical documentation of the numbers of lesbians who have remained in heterosexual marriages for most of their lives.”\textsuperscript{55} The sheer number of later-in-life lesbians is staggering, and it is commonplace among the lesbian community to not even bat so much as an eye of confusion towards a woman who comes out as a lesbian after engaging in heterosexual relationships her entire life.

A locus of power for men, a PDL society prescribes heterosexuality as an ethical imperative to keep patriarchal order. This is evidenced in the material characteristics described by Gough and Rich. As the patriarchy creates these restrictions of the female body, duty-law

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{55} Rich, \textit{Blood}, 654
works to keep these restrictions in place. Male or not, members of society act within the ethical imperative of heterosexuality because they have a duty to act in such a way. As such, heterosexuality becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, often masking information that would otherwise make resistance possible.

Material lesbian existence is particularly predicated on active resistance to the ethical norm of heterosexuality. While it is true that the ethical imperative of heterosexuality functions in such a manner that it hurts all members of a society, as explored earlier, ultimately lesbian women are harmed in a unique way, for they cannot freely actualize their identities under Rich.

While not identical, Rich’s conception of compulsory heterosexuality is in agreement with Virginia Held’s theory of networks, as well as Michel Foucault’s theory of the panopticon. All three of the aforementioned concern themselves with theories of how individuals themselves act within ethical systems to uphold ethical values and complete prescribed duties, consciously or not; All of which help possibly explain why lesbian lateness occurs. It seems clear that through Foucault, Held, and Rich, there is a strong idea given of a PDL ethical landscape prevalent in society.

There are a few relevant criticisms to the theories of Held, Foucault, and Rich as proof of a PDL ethical system. Two critiques stand out in particular. First, related to Held and Foucault is the fact that they were not written with specific attention to lesbian issues, which may make them difficult to apply as theories in support of this larger project. Second, for Rich, some of her postulations come off as dated when discussing specific issues felt by women and lesbians under PDL.

To open with consideration to Foucault and Held, using their theories to explain a phenomenon of lesbian lateness may be argued as problematic, considering that their theories are
not meant to serve this specific issue in the first place. One may argue that it is difficult to extrapolate meaning from something far removed from the original context. I briefly acknowledge a similar sentiment before the discussion of Rich, admitting that it is a fault of Foucault and Held to neglect a more critical, intersectional response insofar as I desire to apply their theories to the nuanced issue of lesbian lateness. I take the position however that this matters not for the grand scheme of my argument, as I give support from Rich to provide the intersectionality needed to form relevant basis for my argument. My desire is not to appropriate the meaning of Foucault and Held’s theories, but to take them as exemplary proof towards the existence of a duty-law ethical landscape, which I then argue can be interpreted to fit my claim.

As for Rich, I believe that there is certainly powerful criticism to be found in the notion that her writing reads as dated at parts. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is nearly a 40-year-old work, and since its writing, there has been progress made in the way of both LGBT+ and women’s rights. I particularly noticed this issue in the portion of “Compulsory Heterosexuality” where Rich works with Kathleen Gough to provide a list of characteristics of male power. I found much of the base points listed relevant and important, but found myself editing much of the specific actions they provided out of the list as they have either become entirely less problematic than Rich makes them seem, or have become irrelevant altogether in discussion of patriarchal power especially insofar as I felt that it related to constructing a well-rounded argument in defense of my thesis.

For example, Rich argues in characteristic 5 that the “prescription for ‘full time’ mothering”\textsuperscript{56} is one such characteristic of male power. By this, Rich means that the patriarchy prevents women from leaving the home to pursue careers, and instead confines them to

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 39
childrearing at home. While the lack of space for women in the workforce was certainly a greater issue at the time of writing 40 years ago, in contemporary society there is certainly less debate over whether or not women should be allowed to leave the homes in favor of the workplace.

I believe that this certainly works to show that some of the sentiments brought up by Rich do not hold the same weight under a modern reading, yet I do not believe that this constitutes a fatal flaw for Rich’s work. Despite its age, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” remains well-known as an integral work in the lesbian philosophical cannon. While some of the examples Rich uses to outline her thoughts may be dated, I believe that the overall points Rich makes are still relevant, as even 40 years later, it seems that the existence and harm of a PDL ethical system are still in operation.

To wrap up this portion of my argument, I believe that through Foucault, Held, and Rich, I have shown that a PDL system of ethics persists among lay society, which offers a possible explanation to lesbian lateness. The existence of a PDL ethical system and the variety of institutions which keep it in power may contribute to part of what prevents lesbians from coming-out earlier in their lives. Insofar as lay society generally functions within this ethical landscape, lesbian ethical communities exist outside of this, functioning within an entirely different set of ethical praxis. Because the ethical structure of lay society works to render lesbian ethics invisible and punishes individuals who abandon duty-ethics, transition from lay to lesbian society is a task that proves quite difficult. In the final portion of my paper, I seek to prove the existence of this radically different lesbian ethical system, while critically comparing the differences between PDL ethics and lesbian ethics, to come to the overarching conclusion that differences in embraced ethical systems offers a broad possible explanation as to why lesbians generally come out later in life.
Lesbian communities importantly operate under a drastically different system of ethics in comparison to that of lay society. This is drastically distinct from the duty-based ethics enforced by lay society. Lesbian ethics notably directly opposes duty, and instead places value on the genuine wants of individuals, while additionally encouraging individuals to foster genuine connections with one another. As these ethical differences are radically dissimilar, I surmise that it potentially makes for a difficult transition.

Lesbian philosopher Sara Hoagland, in “Lesbian Ethics,” importantly argues that lesbian communities do indeed operate within a certain unique ethical framework, which lies directly in opposition to PDL ethics. Hoagland begins her argument by reiterating some of the same themes asserted in Rich, claiming first that the “society of the fathers”\textsuperscript{58, 59} poses an insidious harm to lesbians and lesbian communities, leading to some devastating effects. Hoagland believes that the ultimate harm that the society of the fathers wages on lesbian lives is “denial of lesbian existence.”\textsuperscript{60} While Rich takes the approach that lesbian existence is mitigated by duty-law ethical structures that affect all women horizontally,\textsuperscript{61} Hoagland’s view instead focuses on how such a structure specifically harms lesbian lives. I believe that Hoagland’s claim has merit when considering ethical explanations as to why lesbians tend to come out later.

I believe that while lesbian ethics is certainly a healthier, more attractive system of ethics to follow, that the magnitude of difference between PDL ethics and lesbian ethics also contributes to lesbian lateness. To explain this claim, I would like to first explore what lesbian

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 2
\textsuperscript{59} This is the term Hoagland uses to describe PDL society in her writing. All uses of this term in conversation with Hoagland should be taken to mean such.
\textsuperscript{60} Hoagland, \textit{Lesbian Ethics}, 4
\textsuperscript{61} Rich, \textit{Blood}, 638, this non-exhaustive list focuses on the way in which PDL ethics focuses on women as a class. While Rich agrees that lesbians face a very specific oppression on top of this, her argument remains distinct from that of Hoagland, who chooses to speak on the strictly material experience of lesbians.
ethics advocates according to Sarah Hoagland and Claudia Card, notable lesbian philosophers. I will begin by examining Hoagland’s “Lesbian Ethics.”

Sarah Hoagland specifically makes two important claims in “Lesbian Ethics” that I would like to focus on as relevant. First, that PDL society is staunchly anti-lesbian, and second, that lesbian society functions within its own ethical framework, distinctive from that of PDL society. I believe that these considerations do much work to support the claim that lesbian lateness is rooted in ethical differences between communities.

To describe what she calls the unique framework of lesbian ethics, Hoagland first primes by discussing the manner in which “traditional ethics” works. Hoagland describes both focus and function of PDL in four parts, stating that:

1: The focus and direction of traditional ethics has not been individual integrity and agency, but rather social organization and social control.
2: The values around which traditional ethics revolve are antagonistic, the values of dominance and subordination.
3: Traditional ethics undermines rather than promotes individual moral ability and agency.
4: These aspects of traditional ethics combine to legitimize oppression by redefining it as social organization.

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62 This is functionally identical to the concept of PDL
63 Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics, 12
64 Ibid, 12
Hoagland’s perceptions of PDL ethics are in clear agreement with sentiments also raised by Foucault, Held, and Rich. All of the aforementioned thinkers, despite different philosophical backgrounds, seem to agree that there exists some sort of domination/control force at play that drives individuals to act within certain parameters. It should also be noted that each thinker agrees that this mode of domination and control masks its oppressive nature by operating as a social ethical structure. By operating as such, individuals in a PDL system carry out the will of the patriarchy, whether conscious of it or not.

As a refresher, for Foucault, this structure takes the form of the panopticon, forcing individuals to self-police their own behaviors, perhaps without thinking, to avoid the possibility of getting caught acting out of line by anyone who might be watching.\textsuperscript{65} In Held, this is the power of networks, which causes individuals to feel like their duties prevent them from acting in more desirable ways. For Rich, this structure encompasses compulsory heterosexuality, which leads individuals to (consciously or not) be contented with their own systemic oppression, because it robs them of the ability to engage in any other mode of thought. Similarly, Hoagland states that this force “Does not acknowledge separation as an option for moral agents.”\textsuperscript{66} Participation in this ethical structure is implicitly required and normative, not a choice, and remains well-hidden.

Based on these premises, it seems undeniable that a duty-law ethical framework incites harm, and works particularly by keeping agents unaware of alternatives. Hoagland makes it apparent that lesbian communities operate within a different framework, despite this overbearing and ever-present structure of PDL ethics. Hoagland’s perception of lesbian ethics brands it as a

\textsuperscript{65} Foucault, \textit{Discipline}, 112
\textsuperscript{66} Hoagland, \textit{Lesbian Ethics}, 54
system that most importantly values individual choices above all, writing that it “Focuses on enabling and developing individual integrity and agency in relations to others.”

While Hoagland believes that separation from PDL ethics is certainly possible, she also recognizes re-orienting one’s life within a framework of lesbian ethics as both radical and revolutionary, just as Rich describes it, and just as Held describes the difficulty of separating oneself from one’s own inborn network. Hoagland’s system importantly conceptualizes itself as an act of resistance, and the task of separating oneself from the confines of PDL ethics is an extremely difficult one. To quote Cheryl Clarke on the difficulty of lesbian resistance:

“For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture is an act of resistance. The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship…”

For Hoagland and other lesbian ethicists, separation from a PDL system distinctly means undermining the system of PDL ethics, and choosing to focus on lesbianism, lesbian lives, and lesbian ethics instead, which is not necessarily an easy feat, as explored earlier – exactly what makes separation so radical and revolutionary. “It can be misleading to say that an option exists for someone who is unaware of it,” claims Claudia Card in Lesbian Choices. This mere fact alone does work to explain a possible reason as to why lesbian lateness occurs. It becomes clear that in order to embrace lesbian ethics in the relevant manner, that one has to abandon the PDL.

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67 Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics, 12
68 Ibid, 67
ethical system prescribed to one, and then choose lesbian ethics. The essence of what it is to be a lesbian embracing lesbian ethics means undertaking a radical rejection of PDL ethics. I have now hoped to finalize these connections in my thesis.

Despite the difficulty of switching ethical systems playing a possible hand in lesbian lateness, lesbian ethics importantly endows one with an important certain possibility not present in a PDL ethical framework – what Hoagland calls autokoenony. To begin exploration into the realm of lesbian ethics, Hoagland describes autokoenony as the hallmark trait of lesbian ethics, meaning “the self in the community.” For Hoagland, autokoenony means being aware of one’s own wants, needs, and desires, and being able to make choices for oneself. Hoagland makes the distinction that this is different from the concept of autonomy, which also implies that one has choice, yet importantly seems to note that one acts as an agent of the world in isolation, insofar as one acts totally alone rather than with a community according to Hoagland. Hoagland wants to emphasize that autokoenony is a way of being that allows one to embrace one’s own chosen community, and yet exist as an agent of free will within such community.

To further elaborate on what Hoagland means by this, she embeds a quote by Julia Penelope on lesbian community, who writes:

“First and foremost, membership in a community is a voluntary act. One joins a community because she finds companionship, support, and commitment to common ideals within that community. Second, a community, as such, is internally defined by its

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71 Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics*, 145
72 Ibid., 145
73 Ibid., 146
members on the basis of shared experiences and common interpretations of events in the real world.”

The important thing for Hoagland about lesbian ethics, is that unlike PDL ethics, it is a system that is chosen, in a community that is chosen. As we have seen earlier, PDL ethics are prescribed, and entrap individuals through duty-law. Lesbian ethics clearly stands alone when assessing these ethical structures as such. The issue is, individuals are born into ethical systems that reject the ideals that lesbian ethics favors. To live by lesbian ethics means not only abandonment of PDL ethics and desire to take part in lesbian ethics, but to restructure a way of thinking that one has been taught to follow since birth.

To add to this line of thought, Claudia Card, in *Lesbian Choices* interestingly claims that “In a patriarchal society, lesbians are more likely to have exercised choice in becoming lesbian than heterosexual women are to have exercised choice in becoming heterosexual.” I believe this phrase does work to emphasize further that there is ultimately a virtue of choice that defines lesbian ethics. Card seems to hold the view that lesbianism is a freeing label insofar as this choice exists and continues to hold value.

To reiterate, I believe that this notion is important because it remains completely opposite from that of which is given value under PDL ethics – duty. Lesbian ethics centers itself on self-choice and the ability to live a life guided by one’s own desires rather than the duties prescribed to one by others. To this note, Card interestingly writes in “Lesbian Choices” that “A woman unaware of lesbian options may not feel there was any choice.” Again centering the importance

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75 Card, *Choices*, 48
76 Ibid., 49
of choice as praxis for lesbian ethics. I believe that insofar that I have provided sufficient evidence to show that lesbian ethics is so grounded in desire, that this grounding sets it apart from other ethical systems. While I have hoped to prove by this point that lesbian ethics is drastically different from PDL ethics, it is the case that lesbian ethics shares a similar praxis to care ethics, and I would like to critically discuss what I believe are distinctions between the two.

Nel Noddings describes the field of ethics known as care ethics in “Caring.”77 I would like to explore what I believe to be an important distinction that Noddings makes, claiming that “ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring.”78 Through this, Noddings makes it apparent that there is a difference between something that she calls ethical caring, and something that she calls natural caring. I believe that this distinction of Noddings’ will be relevant in contrasting this brand of caring with the kind of caring emphasized so widely in lesbian ethics.

To clarify concepts a bit, what Noddings calls “ethical caring” is the type of caring that care ethics advocates, as “natural caring” embodies intuitive responses and desires one might have in any particular moment. Noddings believes that ethical caring is a more perfect form of natural caring, that it embraces the good-natured intuitions of natural caring while taking a sort of virtuous justification into account.79

To give a clear comparison of lesbian ethics and care ethics, I want to walk through a scenario and discuss how both ethical schools of thought would react, based on their ethical praxis. Imagine you have a distant relative who is sick in the hospital. You have an ethical decision to make, to visit or not to visit this relative. For whatever reason, your first response to

78 Ibid, 80
79 Ibid, 81
hearing this proposition is something along the lines of “I don’t want to go!” What do you do? According to care ethics as described by Nodding, you should go to the hospital to visit your relative. Perhaps it may be arduous in some fashion to visit this relative, but ultimately the care ethicist seems to want to claim that visiting is, under most situations, the ethically correct choice, as “we are never free, in the human domain, to abandon our preparedness to care… We cannot refuse obligation in human affairs by merely refusing to enter relation.” Obligation is not entirely removed from this line of thinking, although I do not want to mistake care ethics for placing as strong of an emphasis on obligation as PDL ethics is guilty of.

The sort of obligation that care ethics is concerned with is obligation that stems from care. Care ethics encourages individuals to evaluate possible courses of action and to react in a manner that reads as caring, insofar as acting in this manner does not cause harm to the actor. This line of action is importantly not the line of action that the lesbian ethicist would advocate for however. The lesbian ethicist would instead say that you certainly should not visit that relative you don’t really want to see. Hoagland in fact writes that lesbian society is unique in this fashion, that it places value on connections and genuine desire instead of duty in the slightest, stating “If we need duty or obligation as a motive, we haven’t a connection.” It is apparent through this comparison, that lesbian ethics sets itself apart insofar as it advocates that individuals within the system center their lives on their own existence and desire before anything else.

This notion taken up by lesbian ethicists is clearly drastically different from the weight Foucault, Held, and Rich claim patriarchal society puts on duty despite how one might feel about acting from duty. All three thinkers seem to take up the opinion that there are serious

80 Ibid, 86
81 Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics, 98
consequences that arise from failing to carry out prescribed duties. In contrast, Hoagland further posits that acting out of duty not only fails to fall in line with a lesbian ethical framework, but that it in fact interrupts the genuine emotional connections valued in lesbian communities, and instead reinforces the power structure of the patriarchy, as she claims that "duty lacks emotion."\(^8\)

Expanding on this point made by Hoagland, genuine emotion and desire is a central pillar of lesbian ethics. Duty arguably exists as the opposite of desire, as actions undertaken because of obligation are done simply because they have to be done, and not because the agent desires to complete them. Lesbian ethicists view this like of lesbian ethics as superior because it encourages the fostering of genuine human connections, and places overt importance on the desires of the individual above all. PDL ethics cares not about how agents feel about completing their duties, it simply enforces that these duties are to be carried out.

To conclude overall, the clear and vast differences in ethical landscapes favored by lesbian and non-lesbian communities, combined with the oppressive nature of duty-law patriarchal communities ultimately seem to possess some explanatory power when trying to solve this phenomenon. In what appears as a dipartite system, individuals are first born into an oppressive society that operates within a PDL ethical framework. Under this framework, lesbian individuals have their desires obfuscated, paths to lesbianism rendered invisible, and their ultimate rights to existence after they do come out as lesbians diminished, all by PDL. Women under PDL are excessively monitored to the point of self-policing, and act within prescribed duties based out of fear, according to Foucault, Held, and Rich. This is the first of two ways in which lesbian women are restricted from coming out. Additionally, lesbian ethics functions as

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\(^8\) Ibid, 119
drastically different from PDL ethics. Because of this supreme difference, the more attractive form of lesbian ethics is certainly masked by PDL ethics. Being that both PDL ethics remains restrictive and oppressive, and lesbian ethics remains so vastly different and unseen in society, I would like to make the claim that this possibly contributes to reasons why lesbians tend to come out later in life than their LGB+ counterparts.

While I have made a point to address bits of criticism as they have come up throughout my paper, there are a few valid points of criticism of my argument as a whole I would like to address and defend below prior to concluding.

To start, there is the ever-present question of why issues like this affect lesbians specifically. At the time of writing, selections from this paper has been presented in a few different academic settings, and without fail, there always seemed to be a question arising about how or why I am able to make the claim that other individuals in the LGBTQ+ community are not affected in the same manner that lesbians are.

Before diving into a response to this, I want to take a moment to briefly talk about semantics, to make an important distinction. There are often questions that compare lesbians to the LGBTQ+ community as a whole when asking why the oppression is different. I want to first note that it is only relevant to compare lesbian issues with those of bisexual people and gay men, as these are the only markers of specific sexuality in the acronym. Trans refers to a gender identity, and is thus different from sexual identity, and cannot be compared in the same way. The Q, referring to queer, is most often used as an umbrella term to describe a variety of orientations of gender or sexuality. Even not considering the fact that queer is a slur that not all individuals are comfortable using, queer can be an ambiguous term, there is no general consensus even within the community about what queer truly means, and collecting relevant data requires
significant effort this project cannot undertake. Thus, if we are even considering a comparison of other members of the community, it is first important to narrow it down to only lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.

With issues of semantics cleared up, we can tackle the main question. Gay men and bisexuals face undeniable oppression, although this oppression is unique and quite dissimilar from that experienced by lesbians. It is outside the scope of this paper to explore the nuanced experiences of bisexuals and gay men, however it is clear that the experience is different for a few reasons.

While it is not my intention to take a reductionist standpoint and boil lesbian down to simply a rejection of men, it could be argued that one of the hallmarks of lesbianism is, in fact, its complete and utter rejection of men, to the point of indifference. To be a lesbian is to actively subvert patriarchal norms of womanhood, and to often face danger because of it, as spoken by lesbian thinkers earlier in this paper. While facing their own host of issues, this is not a requirement in the experience of gay men or bisexuals.

To go deeper, bisexual individuals can exist without overtly rejecting societal norms. I do not want to make the claim that this is not harmful for bisexual individuals, but it should be noted that it is not completely at odds with bisexual existence to not actively resist men and maleness. Many bisexual women (more on male/male relationships in a bit) find themselves contented in relationships with men, and when they do find themselves in relationships with women, there is not necessarily a complete and total rejection of ethical standards one needs to reject, as the existence of a bisexual woman is not necessitated on this rejection, as it is the case with lesbian women. Women who love women will always be at odds with society, and yet society still rewards them when they do carry out heterosexual norms. The fact that they can
oscillate between these two modes of being seen by society makes the ways in which they are oppressed different from the ways in which lesbians are oppressed, resulting in different ethical upbringings and effects. Additionally, bisexual communities may or may not be oriented with different ethical landscapes when compared to those of lesbian communities because men are inherently a part of them, making the challenges they must undergo when coming out dissimilar from that of the lesbian experience.

As for gay men, who also occupy a different experience than lesbians or bisexuals, they remain visible as men, and thus can be understood as operating within the norms of patriarchal ethics, despite their sexual orientation. While there is no denying that gay men also face pressure under duty-law, and are pressured to act within the patriarchal “family values” model, this oppression is unique because this oppression does not exist for the benefit of other women, it arguably exists to placate men and male power. The oppression of gay men is not instrumental to the existence of a patriarchal duty law ethical society. PDL ethics oppresses women, and lesbians as an extension of this, for their failure to operate within ways that men deem ethically valid. Duty law does not oppress men as a class, although it may certainly work to oppress men who are marginalized in other regards. The important thing to take away is that the ways in which men are made to act in society handed down as such for the upkeep of patriarchal standards, and so the coming out experience of gay men is not as necessarily as subversive of societal ethics as that of lesbian existence, which is in fact predicated on the subversion of PDL ethics.

Those who subvert cisheteronormativity are always considered marginalized, yet lesbians have the clearest and most constant oppression in this regard, which is why their coming out experience cannot be compared to that of other individuals in the LGB+ community.
In a different line of thought, philosopher Marilyn Frye asks why lesbians need their own ethics in the first place in an essay titled “Getting it Right.” Frye, and thinkers like her, look at ethics as something not completely necessary as a societal guideline, and hold the view that instead of coming up with a distinctive set of ethics, as offered by Card and Hoagland, that lesbians should simply “do without ethics entirely.” For Frye, instead of a system of ethics, a system of politics is preferred. Frye believes that the concept of ethics is too normative and representative of the oppressive systems that lesbian ethics is trying to escape.

I believe that Frye’s view is the wrong view to hold. Lesbian ethics possesses a certain power. Adoption of lesbian ethics, which is so radically different from PDL ethics, gives one access to a system that embraces care and desire over duty and discomfort. Lesbian ethics cannot possibly take the shape of the subject-object model that exists in PDL as Frye worries, because then it is not lesbian ethics. If we revisit Hoagland’s concept of autokoenony for example, there is an explicit stated pillar of lesbian ethics that values individual desires, and community bonds over all else. This is clearly absent in oppressive structures which instead name duty and obligation as the most notable precepts.

In conclusion, with this paper, I looked to defend my claim that lesbian lateness may be attributed to a difference in ethical landscapes between lesbian and non-lesbian societies, with non-lesbian societies possessing an oppressive patriarchal duty-law landscape. I believe that I have provided fair support for this claim, turning to thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Virginia Held, and Adrienne Rich to support my theory of an oppressive patriarchal duty-law society, and turning to thinkers such as Sarah Hoagland and Claudia Card to prove the distinctive difference.

83 Card, *Choices*, 66
84 Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics*, 32
85 *Ibid*, 182
between lesbian and non-lesbian ethics. Lesbian existence is complex and radical. The lack of scholarship dedicated to lesbian philosophy, to finding answers to lesbian issues is discouraging, although not damming. Through this writing, I have hoped to provide a valid theory of why lesbian lateness occurs, and thus hope to have enriched the breadth of academic scholarship on lesbian issues in philosophy.
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