# **INDEXING IDENTITY IN 1970'S GAY AND LESBIAN PUBLICATIONS**

**About the Project**

During my studies of Linguistics, the concept of identity and how it is formed has been a subject I find fascinating, particularly in relation to covert signs and spoken language. Each social group possesses their own terminologies, usages, and way of indexing their identity to each other within the larger hegemonic structure. This can be subtle, like an image or cultural reference, or rather overt, like a statement of identity. Originally looking for instances of coming-out in 1970's Gay and Lesbian publications from the University of Pittsburgh's American Left Ephemera Collection and the Underground Press Collection, I found that this community and the desire to come-out were already well established. But in addition to coming-out on a grander scale via publications, these groups were also positioning themselves amongst each other and society at large via their languages in the pieces and content shown in imagery. In looking at four magazines from the 1970's, I noticed that each of these publications used their language and format to attract like-minded individuals within the Gay and Lesbian communities. This shows that "homosexual" culture (using the language of the time) is not as homogenous as it may appear in media of the decade produced by those outside the community.

**Looking at the Pieces**

These magazines were very similar in their materiality. All were mostly lower budget, as can be seen with some misaligned layouts, handwritten edits, and cut-and-paste lines around some images. A few of them were folded down the middle and torn in the corners. But while the publications may be aesthetically similar, they differ drastically in content. The Lesbian publications I worked with, Lavender Vision (1971) and Spectre (1971), were clearly for a Lesbian audience. However, they differed in the voices used to express statements of identity. Lavender Vision is more diverse with its voice when compared to Spectre. It uses write-ins from its audience to discuss issues like coming-out and dedicates space to positive affirmations of identity across racial boundaries. Spectre on the other hand is made up of two “radical, separatist white women” (1) who seek other white Lesbians to critique themselves and help solve patriarchal and racial injustice. Spectre is hard to read with modern eyes, despite their claim that they are trying to limit putting more problems on Black women during a historically turbulent time. However, there is a danger in not including voices who are hurt by the problems you are trying to fix.

Both of the other publications looked at, Pittsburgh Gay News (1973) and Gay Life (1979), were less concerned with politics than their Lesbian counterparts. Gay News audience was obviously geared towards the "Gay" community at large, that is both Gay men and Lesbian women as noted by the conjoined symbols for the male and female sex and is content wise geared towards building the community. There is no overt sexual imagery in Gay News, which was common in Gay male oriented magazines from this time, as seen with Gay Life. Gay Life is clear in its message of spreading information for the community that is relevant, although apolitical. It is mostly filled with ads from local meet-ups and Gay-friendly bars to health clinics. While being a Gay magazine in this time was inherently political, it advises its readers that “…the way to fight is not through politics. It is through pleasure.” (14)

**Lavender Vision, 1971**

Publications from 1960’s-1970’s that center around Women’s Liberation, Civil Rights, and Gay and Lesbian Rights are plentiful. Each one allows the reader to take in a conversation from the time. While some have a single vision, many were starting to acknowledge the intersectionality of their causes. Lesbian women were no exception and created many independent publications to add their voices to the conversation. Lavender Vision is one example that aimed at creating a larger community of like-minded, “women who love women”. In their own words, “We will not be forced into being a single issue liberation movement. Our struggle against sexism includes fighting all forms of domination because we believe sexism to be the first and most basic fucked up power relationship.” (2)

       The 1970's was no cake walk for anyone who may have lived an alternative lifestyle. Creating spaces to find one another was crucial not only for the group’s progress, but also for the well-being of the individual members spread across the United States. Being a woman was hard enough; couple that with a queer identity and you’re bound to encounter problems. Despite this, inside Lavender Vision are pleas for companionship, pronouncements of identity, and inquiries into what it means to be queer. A particular question asked by columnist “Sue Sappho” begs, “Gay people speak of “coming out”. How does one come out when there is nowhere to come out to?” (2)

Lavender Vision follows that question with a grand proclamation on the opposite page, “WE ARE LESBIANS” (3). With a queer afflatus, the writer lays down a manifesto for Lesbian women everywhere. The constant use of the plural “we” shows the idea of a unified group with a shared vision that, “creates our own way of making love...of fighting... of making a revolution that is not just on walls and in leaflets but in our daily lives.”  The jagged lines of the border which might be seen as forming the shapes of open mouths reflects a group shouting this affirmation with resounding effects. While mostly empowering, the piece makes clear that being a Lesbian is, “historically dangerous...Gay sisters know what it means to be underground.” ¹ But more importantly Lavender Vision answers Sue Sappho’s question with an underground example: she could come out through this publication. While not traditional (coming-out to strangers in a magazine), there would be others to hear her announcement and acknowledge her as one of their own. This may seem trite in an age where just owning a cell phone allows access to a queer community, but in 1970’s America this potentially was a life-saving statement. Another of Sue’s statements hints at this, “please do not keep us waiting long. We need your help right now.”

Lavender Vision is a very inviting magazine. There is nothing in this publication that is meant to shock its readers, but it does seek to provide a space for its readers to hear stories from similar women across the country. While this magazine is geared towards Lesbian women, as someone outside of the community I did not feel unwelcome to its pages. The symbol for the female sex is drawn in many varying ways like borders, line-breaks, and page adornment. The drawings placed throughout the pages are entertaining and quite lovely; almost all them depicting women's faces and even two Lesbian cats, as per the description. While not all the columns are signed like Sue Sappho's, there is another named writer, A. Dyke. Many of the creative touches surrounding and throughout the text are cheeky like this, and aid in creating the safe space that Lavender Vision sought to provide.

**Spectre, 1971**

 At first, Spectre reads rather harsh in its tone. “For Revolutionary Separatist White Women” is something that, if seen today, indexes a bigoted identity. But this publication is an example of a group of Lesbian women attempting to grapple with their identity. This magazine speaks as if it is a larger collective, but Spectre admits that it is two women referring to themselves as such. Each column is unsigned, because as they put it, “ideas are not private property,” (16) but the language is consistent and often informal. It is clear that the women of Spectre have thought about how they chose to position themselves not only as Lesbians, but as women and allies, despite not including women who may have a stake in the problems Spectre is trying to address.

What Spectre claims it is trying to do is stop putting responsibility on Black women as white women who should be actively addressing their own role in the system (4). I think what they were trying to accomplish was self-reflection, but other literature I have read, specifically Audre Lorde’s The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House (1984), have pointed out that listening to the experience of others who have been oppressed is imperative for seeing things that might be overlooked by ego. Spectre also effectively erases the opportunity for Black women to voice their opinion on whether they should or should not be involved in this conversation. The publication does address white ego and whiteness being an assumed trait, but I would say these statements may be privileging their own whiteness by not including Black women in the conversation of criticizing racism in white female communities.

There are some moments of levity between the larger statements. One cartoon of crudely drawn androgynous individuals wearing overalls marked with the symbol for the female sex shows them walking down the street while walking their cat and remarking on how many heterosexuals there are. Another poem reminds readers to not be a “chickenshit”, a phrase I haven’t heard since my mother said it to me, meaning something like a “cop-out” or “wimp” (3). Here the writers are demanding their readers to get up and start making change, as chickenshit is often used to describe someone being indecisive in a cowardly way.. It’s clear that the women of Spectre are ready to take action against anything that might hint at themselves being chickenshits.

Remembering the magazine was created by two people, Spectre's crude aesthetic makes a lot of sense. Like Lavender Vision, this issue of Spectre is pretty beat up and lacks the compassion that felt palpable in Lavender Vision's layout and message. It is folded down the middle, the pages have yellowed, and it looks like it was passed around quite a bit. Pieces like these remind me of attending Pride events or Queer rallies where pamphlets and magazines are handed out in plenty. Often these end up placed into a backpack for a later read, but end up sadly forgotten. Spectre however looks well read; the corners on many of the pages are bent and a few are torn on the back cover. This could be a sign of neglect however. And despite my excitement over how this item may have been acquired, I was surprised to find that Spectre was the only publication that I worked with that charged a fee.

With the exception a single break-line of asterisks between columns, each section in Spectre bleeds right into the next. Some of these have been altered with pen to form a chain of the female symbol. The handwritten notes in the margins add to the journal-like quality one gets when reading through Spectre. Even the page numbers are handwritten, and are not consistent in location. Often, they are in the lower corners, but they can appear in between columns, on the top of the text, or centered on the page. The cartoons and pictures added in are crudely drawn and cut, adding to the DIY aesthetic. These rather erratic placements and handwritten edits truly give the impression of urgency. It is clear that for the two women of Spectre, expressing these ideas was important for positioning their identity in an ever-changing world, even if we can now see these views as myopic. Sorting through publications like the ones during my ASRA study has made me reconsider the way I have treated similar pieces I’ve acquired at LGBTQIA+ events. These pieces, if well kept, could be relics of our generation for future queer individuals to look back to and assess.

**Gay Life, 1979**

Gay Life (1979) is the complete opposite in terms of stance when positioned next to a publication like Spectre. It is overtly a Gay men’s magazine, and wants you to know this. It reads as very apolitical, in that is doesn’t state much about movements or ideologies, but creating a magazine openly talking sex practices (Gay or straight!) was taboo at the time and can be seen as inherently political in that regard. The cover story of this particular issue “Pittsburghers speak out on gay issues,” is a small column towards the back and is actually a list of surveyed questions asked of the straight population (24). While this gives a very enlightening peek into the public opinion towards homosexuals at the time, it says little about the publication’s political leanings.

Aside from a difference in attitude in Gay Life compared to other publications looked at in this exploration, Gay Life was also produced at a much higher caliber than publications like Spectre or Lavender Vision. Hard to miss are the abundance of advertisements ranging from Gay bus trips to NYC, sales on poppers, to local meet-up spots for Gay men. These ads likely are the reason for such a nice printing. The paper is still white indicating a higher quality, the printing layout is highly organized, and the content is aimed at sharing Gay entertainment across the US rather than cultural ideas.

The whole magazine possesses a levity that isn’t present in many of the queer publications I found from this decade. Gay Life tries at offering opportunities to live an identity rather than just debate and criticize it. The magazine is aware of its sexual freedom, and shares wisdom on forgetting the troubles of the world, “For gay people the war is on, but the way to fight is not through politics. It is through pleasure.” (14) Now, I do not believe this makes the creators of this magazine unsympathetic to the plights of the community and to others, but I think the mission was different. Gay Life was aimed at sharing information on safe spaces to go about daily practices. Health clinics, sex shops, Gay bars; these are all listed prominently in the magazine’s ads and are frankly important locations to many members of the community. The first being very important to the community, as many Gay men and Lesbian women (even today) can feel uncomfortable discussing personal matters at standard medical practices.

I think the condition of the publication is also related to its function. Unlike Spectre, which reads like a manifesto, Gay Life is more of a guide for Gay men navigating Pittsburgh. It can’t sort out issues of identity, but it can suggest a place where after a few drinks you could have this conversation in person. These locations though are likely geared towards Gay men though, and may not be what a Lesbian woman would be looking for on her weekend retreat. But I think magazines like Gay Life served an important purpose, keeping the community safe with discrete sharing of underground knowledge, so finding it was kept in very good condition suggests it was stored safely.

**Pittsburgh Gay News, 1973**

Pittsburgh Gay News was a much more inclusive magazine than the others. Reaching out to "gays of all types" (1), the Gay News concerned itself with spreading information to all members of the community, both Gay men and Lesbians. On the front page, the magazine asks for suggestions on a community center, including a survey for readers to fill out. There are pictures of the previous year's Pride event, depicting events like drag performances and marches. An ad suggesting comprehensive mental health for "sexual minorities" is shown at the top of one page, while another exclaims excitement over a Gay church in Pittsburgh.

There are a lot of community building resources being shared in the pages of Gay News, which is refreshing after reading many of the magazines from the 1970's I worked with. Some of the others, for good reason, were trying to call attention to larger issues within the community and outside of it, while others chose to provide other information geared towards entertainment. It may be the hyperlocality of Pittsburgh Gay News, but it reads rather like a church newsletter. There is a lot of celebrating in Gay News, both of past events and of future endeavors for the local Gay and Lesbian community.

The most unique feature of Gay News was the survey given in the magazine to help decide the future of the new Gay community center (8). Mostly the questions are typical for a survey like this; where should the center be located, what events should be held, what times are preferred, etc. But the final question addresses something larger than any particular group: visibility. Should the center be clearly and boldly identified as Gay, remain quiet about the members, or make it an all-inclusive center? I think for many members of smaller communities like these there is a desire for safe-spaces like a Gay community center, but would they be making themselves targets if they were overtly Gay or did not include straight community members? I can't help but wonder if members may have wished to remain anonymous, and if that would cause them to support being solely Gay or possibly more inclusive. Regardless, this is another example of coming-out on a larger scale. Should the community come out to the city, or remain outside the margins of the public sphere? I think that this question says a lot about the people involved with Pittsburgh Gay News and their mission. They clearly are trying to create an established community of Gays and Lesbians, but they also don't forget that they are part of the larger community of Pittsburghers.

While the publication may not be overtly political, it doesn't appear to shy away from sharing its views, with a disclaimer. One of the pages shares a written rebuttal to Lawrence Lee, a prominent writer and professor at the time, who wrote negatively about the Gay and Lesbian community in a Pittsburgh Press article titled Normal Society Given The Edge. The response is of course against what was said by Lee, and the press gives the reasoning of sharing this response as, "the views expressed in this letter are that of Mr. Gormley, and certainly many others. We thought that the readers of Gay News would be interested in reading this rebuttal to a totally negative article on homosexuality." (6) While possibly not trying to turn away readers, there are certain instances where a community will have an inherent position. Forming a response against a published news article demeaning a group is not even political, its essential for the group. Gay News is subtle in how it positions itself and instead focuses on the fostering spaces for the community to interact.

**Conclusion**

These magazines show very distinct identities within what was a more newly organized group than the nation had seen previously. This decade is important for many marginalized groups in the US. It saw the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement sparked from the Stonewall Riots of the late 1960’s. Some of the conversations may seem less sophisticated now, but it is important to see the movement that has been made and which conversations we are still having today. This would be impossible without magazines like these that have been preserved and now serve to give us a direct conversation with the community in that decade.

All the mentioned publications address their identities in one form or another, and this is something that is all too familiar for any member of the queer community: coming-out. While typically seen as an announcement of one’s homosexuality, sociolinguist Deborah Chirrey states that is actually closer to positioning one’s self against the hegemonic structure and acknowledging the impossibilities for anyone living an alternative lifestyle. This is to say that being Gay or Lesbian is much more than just sleeping with a member of the same sex. How one goes about their social life as a homosexual is entirely different, and was (and can be still) in many ways dangerous.

However, regarding the question Sue Sappho posed in Lavender Vision, “*how does one come out when there is no one to come out to?*” These magazines I believe seek to answer questions like Sue’s through example. The community is scattered, but not one member is alone. In spaces like this, you're already out.

**About The Creator**

Joe Wozniak is a third-year student at the University of Pittsburgh currently studying Linguistics. He hopes to continue his studies in the field post-undergraduate while looking further into pragmatics and speaker cooperation.

**Acknowledgments**

Joe would like to thank his library archivist, Benjamin Rubin, and his faculty mentor, Dr. Marylou Gramm, for all the help, guidance, and assurance they gave him over the months working on ASRA. A huge thanks also to the entire Office of Undergraduate Research staff who gave the opportunity to explore these topics with support and time.

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