

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Lauren Jae Gutterman, chair of the American Studies department at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Her Neighbor's Wife: a History of Lesbian Desire Within Marriage*. So first, can you just introduce us to the premise of your book?

LJG: So the book is about women who were married to men, but experienced same-sex desires. Some of them were able to act on those desires, some were not. And it traces these women as a kind of group in their experiences from the immediate post-World War II period, roughly to the present. And it also faces the changing ways these women are talked about in popular culture, in psychoanalytic texts, and also the ways that these women and debates around them changed among lesbian activist groups.

AT: Now, I do just want to clarify because the title obviously says lesbian. So are we using this as an adjective to describe attraction between two female-identifying individuals? Or are there also women in this book who likely would have identified as bisexual or pansexual or otherwise today? Because I know there's a lot of concern around bi erasure and there's a big desire in queer communities to find themselves in history, but that can come at the expense of other members of the queer community.

LG: Absolutely. Many of these women were in terms of their sexual activity, bisexual, but in terms of their identities, it was a minority who identified as bisexual. And there are various reasons for that, which I trace throughout the book. But the other part of it is, aside from questions of identity, the majority of the women that I found were not saying, "I'm deeply attracted to men," "I'm deeply attracted to women," "my sexual desires don't fit into one category easily." Some women said that, but not many. What most of them were saying was, "I got married because it was what was expected of me." And many of them said they didn't understand what sexual pleasure was until they had a sexual experience with another woman. I don't in the book ascribe an identity label to anyone. I follow how they talked about themselves. And so kind of thinking about how to talk about these women was often a challenge. And I think the word I use most often is wives, because that's the one thing that really connects them.

AT: And I think it's also an issue where, because language evolves, and our understanding of different aspects of humanity changes over time, there are people where we don't know how they would have described themselves, because we don't have the documentation, which, obviously, your book is very much about the documentation we do have. I'd like to ask more about that in a minute. But I think it's that issue of, unless we have something like the diary of Anne Lister, we can't definitively say, "this is how someone viewed themselves and their lives."

LG: Yeah, what we can do is trace how these terms and the language that we have to describe sexual identity or behavior changes over time. And so, that's one of the things I trace in the book is how in the immediate post World War II period, the major or dominant opinion among psychoanalysts was that bisexual was a specious identity category. And that this wasn't really real. And people who are identifying as bisexual were really gay. They often talked about lesbian desire as something that was a problem and inclination that many women had and had to overcome. So they didn't necessarily see same-sex desires or even same-sex experiences as fully undermining a woman's identity as heterosexual or in their terms, "normalcy," "sexual normalcy," right? They believe that those desires were something that a woman could overcome or cure herself of. And then the other part of that, that I trace in the second half of the book, after the emergence of gay liberation and lesbian feminism, is that there is this moment in the 1970s of a kind of bisexual chic and bisexuality gets talked about in the mainstream media, becomes much more visible really than ever before. But at the same time, the lesbian communities that many of these women were a part of were really negative about bisexuality. And so even women who might have felt that that was an appealing identity label for themselves, or felt that it best

described their experiences, often felt pressure to identify as a lesbian instead, because bisexuality was seen as a cop-out among many lesbian feminist communities.

AT: It is striking how any marginalized community will always further marginalize members of their own community, like hopefully not as a whole. But we saw this in the feminist movements, it's been white suffragists trying to exclude black suffragists. And then we've got in the '60s and 70s, like Betty Friedan was a massive homophobe. And today, it's the TERFs, with the trans-exclusionary, so-called feminists, I don't think they deserve to be called feminists, personally. It's deeply messed up, obviously. But one of the things that's interesting about the perspective you're taking in this book is that someone like Betty Friedan was very much talking about marriage and the housewife and all of that. You argue that marriage, unlike many other aspects of American life, actually offered more flexibility for queerness than an area like, say, employment. So what's the argument there?

LG: What I'm trying to show is that, first of all, maybe trying to challenge is this idea that women, especially in the post-war period, especially if they were married and lived in the suburbs and fulfilled that quintessential post-war suburban housewife stereotype that there was just no way they could have acted on same-sex desires. And this is coming out of a lot of LGBTQ history that has focused on queer communities in public spaces. And many scholars have documented and drawn attention to the fact that many men who participated in public sex cultures and visited gay bars were married, right? And we know that because many of them were arrested. And so there's been this assumption that married women just simply couldn't have done that. It just wasn't possible. And so one of the goals of the book is to show what actually it was possible, but it was possible because they acted on their same-sex desires in different ways. And so most of these women did not meet same-sex lovers in public places in terms of gay bars or restaurants or other queer community places, but rather their sexual relationships with other women tended to unfold with women they met in the course of their daily lives, often women who were wives and mothers themselves. So it was not at all uncommon for two married women who had kids of the same ages to become friends, socialize with their husbands together and socialize with their kids and then a romantic and sexual relationship evolved from that.

And so that's one of the goals of the book. And then the other thing that I think is important or that I wanted to draw attention to is that a lot of the husbands in this book, it's not always clear how much they knew in terms of their wives' relationships, sexual or romantic relationships with other women, but there are enough examples of men who did clearly know, but chose not to talk about it or not to confront their wives about it because they hoped it would pass, especially in the immediate post-war period when it would have been very, very difficult for these women to get divorced, to identify publicly as a lesbian, to raise kids outside of marriage. Many men didn't really feel that threatened by it or thought it would pass. And so there's this flexibility then, especially in that immediate post-war period when divorce is really stigmatized, homosexuality is really stigmatized, women don't have the earning potential that they have later, that there is this kind of flexibility or queerness within marriage and that there's space, husbands in some cases actively kind of made space for their wives to act on these same-sex desires and pursue same-sex relationships because they didn't necessarily see them as threatening. There's also a way that many of the husbands in the book too were having their own extramarital relationships. And so it was a flexibility in the institution that went both ways. It wasn't only for women.

AT: Now are any of the situations that you look at cases of lavender marriages where you had two same-sex-attracted people of opposite genders marrying basically as protection, as a way to get their families off their backs and not to raise suspicions, but they both go into that situation knowing this is the deal.

LG: Yeah, there were a few examples of that and they varied in some cases. It was to people who felt like they maybe had identified as gay or had had really important same-sex sexual relationships, but felt like they wanted to do their best and try and put it behind them and live a "normal life" and start a family together. And

then there were other examples in which men and women did this as more of a cover in which they didn't have an expectation that they would be living in the way we might expect or assume a husband and wife lived together, that it was more of a pretense. I'm thinking back now, but I don't think any of those relationships ended really well, or at least those are the ones that stick out in my mind. And some of that had to do with women who found that even when they had entered into a "lavender marriage" with a gay man, that they were surprised to find that the man still had these expectations of them, that they would behave as a wife. So there was one woman I'm thinking of who married a man in San Francisco, they were both gay. And she then was really surprised when he was bringing all these gay friends to their house and expecting her to feed them and clean up after them and keep the fridge stocked. And she was like, "I've had enough of this." And then there was another example that was in Texas. And this couple had agreed to a cover marriage. And then the wife realized that the husband really took advantage of her financially, because of the ways that marriage legally provides men access to their wives' finances and property. And so that was another case in which a cover marriage really didn't end up very well.

AT: I think that's getting back to that whole question of even in marginalized communities, the more privileged members of the community will often take advantage of or undermine or exclude the less privileged, like they're both queer, but the man has all of these legal powers in that situation that the woman doesn't.

LG: Absolutely. And that's a way that even people who enter a marriage with these alternative ideas about it find that the structures of the law are certainly giving men greater power and privilege than women.

AT: I think it's also speaking to, in multiple ways, the changing expectations as we gain more rights as women, as queer people, as queer women, gaining more rights means that we expect more for ourselves and from those around us. So, the fact that legally, hopefully, that guy couldn't have taken advantage of his wife financially. A woman has more ability today to stand up and say, "No, you can entertain your own friends. That's not my job. I'm not doing your unpaid labor." But also when you were saying the men didn't see their wives' extramarital affairs as threats, that idea that it's less valid if you're having a relationship than with someone with the opposite sex, and those ideas that we were talking about around bisexuality, a lot of your book does seem to speak to this evolution. Because you're going from the '50s to roughly modern day, and looking at that evolution, and how we are able to expect more and expect better, not that we always get it, but it has changed. So you chose to start the book with this archetype of the idealized womanhood in 1950s. So Barbara Kalish is a wife, mother, lives in the suburbs, and she falls in love with another PTA mom. So what is it about this juxtaposition of that heteronormative nuclear family as the core of what a lot of people see as "this is America, this is vital, this is our foundation," and then juxtaposing that with, "Yeah, but a lot of those ladies were doing things that you would be scandalized by in that time."

LG: Yeah, part of my goal with the book is to say, this period that is so idealized and talked about as a moment when marriage was the strongest, when husbands and wives relationships were better. Or divorce rates were lower. I think how you see this period often depends on your political perspective, but it's still very much celebrated. And I think my goal was to say that this moment that many people see as a golden age of marriage was not what you think it was, and that it was actually much more complicated underneath the surface. And that this institution that we also think about as marking the epitome of heterosexuality, that there was actually a lot of space within it for husbands and wives to act in non-normative ways or ways that were stigmatized or not socially acceptable if they had happened more publicly.

AT: And as we've mentioned, you track this evolution of attitudes and institutions through the subsequent decades. So can you give us a short history of how things changed from the 1950s, roughly to today?

LG: Sure. So there's multiple revolutions, right? One is the emergence of the feminist movement, emergence of lesbian feminism, emergence of gay liberation. And a new pressure among gay and lesbian activists to come out publicly as a first step in attempting to politically transform society and to challenge homophobic attitudes. And this was really a change from the post-World War II period when a lot of lesbian activists were pretty sympathetic to married women who experienced same-sex desires and pretty understanding of the challenges and the forces that had pushed them into marriage and the reasons that they might not be able to leave easily. And that really shifts in the 1970s with this new pressure to come out publicly and a new criticism among gay and lesbian activists of people that they see as closeted and especially those who are in what appear to be straight marriages and are having those benefits of public heterosexuality while behaving much differently beneath the surface or in private. And so there becomes in the 1970s, this new pressure on many of the women that I'm talking about a new pressure to come out publicly, to tell their husbands explicitly how they feel, what's going on with other women and to end their marriages. And of course, this is also then made possible because of shifts in attitudes and laws governing divorce at the same time.

So between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, the divorce rate shoots up. No-fault divorce that is not based on proving one partner failed as a spouse becomes possible in many states. And so divorce becomes much more accessible and possible to think about for many women who hadn't considered it before. And so I had, when I was starting this project, thought of it as a simpler story of from repression to liberation, but what I uncovered was a lot of really mixed feelings, sad feelings, upsetness, feelings of pressure among many women, especially mothers in the 1970s and '80s who felt like they had to make this impossible choice. And in many cases identifying publicly as a lesbian or as a bisexual woman and trying to divorce and leave your husband meant that you might have lost custody of your children. And so this made the pressure to leave and to come out publicly really very emotionally difficult and a very fraught decision for many of the women whose stories they trace. And moving on then beyond that period, thinking about up to the present, I think another big shift is that we've seen is there became in the 1990s and early 2000s, a kind of self-help literature that emerged for women who were referred to by various terms, married women who love women, wives who love women, lesbian or bisexual, married women. And a lot of those self-help books encouraged women who were in this situation not to feel pressure to label their identities and encourage them, to also to reassure them that this didn't necessarily mean that they had to get divorced. And to let them know that there were many ways that women found of balancing existing relationships with husbands and finding space for same-sex lovers, or relationships. And so that is yet another change that I talk about in really the epilogue of the book.

AT: So do you think that things like polycules, for example, that were amongst the youth, I say from my geriatric age of 35. But there does seem to be a lot more openness to non-heteronormative ways of being in committed relationships, depending on what that commitment means for you. And as long as everybody is in agreement on what's going on, and what the boundaries are, and all of that, do you think that that's sort of the next phase that we're going to see of what marriage looks like?

LG: I think absolutely, marriage continues to evolve and to change. And something that is different between contemporary polyamory and most of the relationships that I chart in the book is that, most of those people entered marriage with conventional expectations of what it would look like and how they would arrange their intimate lives. And today, there's just many more possibilities that people can think about for ways to think about organizing their families and the ones that they love and the people they're sexually attracted to. And so it's not only that, it could be a group of people who are in intimate relationship with each other, but it could also be people who are choosing to marry friends that they don't have a romantic or sexual feelings for, but want to build a life with that person, want that person to be their partner. And for that life partner to be different than the person that they're having sex with, or that they're in a romantic relationship with. And as I was saying, marriage continues to change and evolve. And I don't think that any of these models are necessarily liberatory, right? I think that marriage just continues to change. And some people have pointed out that the new desire for

polyamorous relationships today could also be a response to the difficulty of affording a household and all the tasks of raising a family or just getting by financially at this very difficult moment. So it can be a way of sharing the financial burden and caretaking labor.

AT: I saw a movie many years ago, I forget the title, but it was basically talking about this premise that people, particularly men, cheat because you can only get at most 80% of what you need from another person. You're never going to get everything you need from a single other person. And so in the context of the movie, they were talking about a guy who basically lost his 80%, his wife, because he was chasing a 20%, cheating. And so he sacrificed 80 for 20 and how stupid that was. But when we're talking about, I would say being evolved enough to understand that you can have your needs met in different ways by different people, again, as long as everything is consensual, and you all have your boundaries agreed upon and all of that. But that understanding that you don't have to rely on a single person to meet all of your needs, at least for me, I think is very important in a marriage. I am married, for what it's worth. And I think that speaks to, what we're talking about here is these women needed things that they were not getting in their marriage. But I did also want to talk about going back to that question of documentation, because I know that the more marginalized a person is, the less likely her documentation survives. So this is a bigger issue with women's history as a whole. But when we're talking about queer history and any letters or diaries that you were fortunate to be able to access, we've talked about these are the risks that these women would have been facing. If they had kids, they could have lost their kids. If they had a job, they could have lost their job, etc. But one of the things that I saw that your book has been praised for is that you have made a concerted effort to include women of color, because it is so easy to just default to that "white history reflecting all history." But I'm assuming this was more difficult to find those kinds of documentation, because we are adding that extra layer of racial marginalization.

LG: Yeah, absolutely. And it's also about the first wave of gay and lesbian oral history collecting projects and gay and lesbian archives were disproportionately collecting the stories and materials of white gay and lesbian people. And so it's definitely harder to get at the experiences of queer women of color in this period. There were various ways that I tried to do that, and also to try and highlight the stories of queer women of color that I did have access to, because there were so many women's stories that I just had to cut from the book because there wasn't enough space. And one thing I think that is important that I saw was that regardless of race or class, these women did tend to find lovers in the context of their daily lives. Certainly working class women were more likely to go to gay bars than upper middle class women. But for most of them, because of the time constraints of caring for young kids, as most as most of them were, the time constraints of household labor, in addition to paid labor outside the home or not, they just didn't have the same geographic mobility or free time that their male counterparts did. And so all of these women, at least until the 1970s, when things began to change, and more lesbian spaces emerged, their relationships tended to unfold with other wives and mothers in their neighborhood, women they met at work, women they met at church, women in their social circles. And we might then think about this access to the queerness or flexibility of marriage, that kind of space and protection that it provided for women who experienced same-sex desires was something that white women had then greater access to than women of color.

AT: And so when we're looking at the U.S. today, it's a very scary time for a lot of people. And with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* proving that rights we thought we had can be taken away. A lot of people are worried about what an unchecked Republican-controlled government will do to marriage equality, as well as no-fault divorce, which you've explained how that was revolutionary in this process of evolving queer women's rights and ability to live how they choose. So that conservative need to control marriage as sacred to their idea of what America is or should be is still very much present all of these decades later.

LG: What I think many conservatives want today isn't necessarily the end of gay sex, but it is making queer

people less publicly visible and reordering or reasserting the privilege that heterosexual and married people have in society. And so there's lots of examples of this, right? So that at one of the Republican National Conventions, Grindr usage went up tremendously of the Grindr app for men seeking sex with other men or an example of one of the moms of who was co-founder of Moms for Liberty. And her husband is really active in the Republican Party. I think this is in Florida. And that they were regularly having sexual relationship with a third partner, a woman. And so I think there's ways that there's a hypocrisy, right, that we can trace in these ways that some people will advocate publicly for a return to marriages of the post-World War II period. But behind closed doors, we'll do something much different.

AT: So it sounds like it's very much a question both then and now of, "we want the appearance that everything is the way we think it should be," even if, as you said, there is hypocrisy behind closed doors.

LG: Yeah, exactly. Because it's about power, right? And really trying to push queer people and trans people back in the closet to take away the power and the civil rights achievements that they have made, and to return to a time when they were less powerful. And when open discrimination against queer people and trans people and gender nonconforming people is acceptable, and that then people who outwardly conform to normative ideas about gender and sexuality are then rewarded with greater power in society.

AT: How much of this focus on marriage do you think is about controlling women specifically?

LG: Yeah, I think that in this country, the reassertion of patriarchal power that is a part of Christian nationalism, is very much about reasserting men's power over women in various ways, right through marriage, but not exclusively through marriage.

AT: In terms of what people can be doing on an activism front. Because the really scary thing is that the Republicans control all three branches of government. And to me, that raises the question of who is going to check their power? Because from an institutional standpoint, it doesn't look like there is anyone to check that power. And so I guess from an activism standpoint, what can everyone be doing to try and protect themselves, protect their neighbors, protect their families? Is there anything from your perspective that we can do in this time?

LG: A couple things come to mind. Certainly, I don't have all the answers. One thing I think is to resist the urge to hide or to become less visibly queer, because that actually puts LGBTQ people at greater risk. And especially people whose queerness is visible and recognizable and can't be hidden. So that's one thing is to reject that urge to hide or to be quiet in your queerness, and to continue speaking out and being publicly visible. And another thing I think is just to acknowledge in this moment in the United States that trans people are really at greatest risk. So I live in Texas, the Texas legislature only meets every other year. The next session begins in January 2025, hasn't even started already, more than 30 anti-trans bills have been have been filed. And these bills span everything from creating greater punishments for parents who affirm their children's gender identities, to legislating what bathrooms people can use, and even calling for physical and chromosomal tests of university athletes. So I think we really need to recognize that trans people are facing the brunt of the hatred in this moment, and also to really reject and challenge and criticize Democrats who have been arguing after Trump's election that they can't support trans people, that that's going too far. That's why that they've lost so much ground politically. And so I think we really can't let that go or can't let that be acceptable.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.