In America They Call Us Dykes:
notes on the etymology and usage of "dyke"

The women-loving women
in America were called dykes
and some liked it
and some did not...

Judy Grahn, from "A History of Lesbianism"

Lesbians have long been the object of vicious "name-calling" designed to intimidate us into silence and invisibility. Dyke is one of the words that has been negatively and violently flung at us for more than a half century. In the Lesbian/Feminist 1970s, we broke the silence on this tabooed word, reclaiming it for ourselves, assigning to it positive, political values. The reclamation of dyke has also sparked an historical/etymological search for its origins.

Although dyke is used in England, lesbian, Sapphist and butch have been traditional there (Partridge 1968). In the United States, dyke is a cross-cultural term found in both Anglo-American and African-American slang. In African-American slang, dyke, as it stands alone, does not seem to have been in widespread use as of 1970, but more commonly appeared in combination with bull to form bull-dyke, signifying an "aggressive female homosexual," bull-dagger, boon-dagger, and bull-diker being variations. Bull was/is used in Black culture to indicate Lesbian (Major 1970; Berry 1972).*

The term dike or dyke had probably been around for some time before the 1930s-1940s when it was first documented in slang dictionaries. Slang terms often originate among special groups, some of which are "outcasts" of mainstream society whose members feel alienated from the values of the dominant culture. Such groupings may be based on age, race, ethnic, or class background. Among such groups have been the younger generation, Blacks, hoboes, criminals, street people, artists and writers, gays and Lesbians. The creation of new words and new definitions for old words serves a social and political purpose: it may constitute an act of power and rebellion for

* Bull was a tabooed word circa early twentieth century, not be used in mixed company, signifying "the male of the species." Less offensive terms like "top cow" were often substituted. Bull bitch was a rural term applied to "masculine" women (Wentworth, 1944; Wentworth and Flexner, 1975).
those who feel and are powerless; or it may provide a sense of validation and identity denied by the dominant culture, thus becoming a source of social/cultural cohesion and pride — a language of one’s own. A new language helps to articulate a new society. Some slang terms may even be adopted by the dominant culture, eventually becoming “Standard English,” or they may fall into disuse or remain the linguistic property of the special group. Slang terms may be collected and listed in published lexicons, dictionaries, and thesauri. Definitions may change with time. These are slow, complicated evolutions influenced by social, economic, political and intellectual ideas and events in the dominant culture and among those outcast groups.

The earliest known references using dyke or dike (an earlier? spelling no longer in wide usage today) to describe “masculine” Lesbians, or Lesbians generally, date to circa 1920s-1930s, indicating at least a half century of usage.* Partridge indicates that dike denotes a “female homosexual” and that the term comes from the combination bull-dike (Partridge 1968), which was used among Black people as early as circa 1920s-1930s (AC/DC Blues 1977). Godfrey Irwin, a compiler of tramp and underworld slang, likewise supports this definition of bull-dike in a letter to Partridge dated September 18, 1937. During the thirties, bull-dike was also being used among prison inmates at Sing Sing to indicate a woman who practiced oral sex on men (Haragan 1935, as quoted by Partridge 1968). It is interesting that the homosexual bull-dike and the heterosexual bull-dike were both associated with so-called “unnatural” and socially unapproved sexual behaviors. This is one of many connections existing between homosexual slang, heterosexual slang, and woman-hating slang.** By the 1940s we find dike or dyke listed in slang dictionaries to indicate “masculine woman,” being synonymous with other words signifying “Lesbian” (Berrey & Van Den Bark 1942, 1947).***

In the pre-liberation forties, fifties and sixties, “Lesbian slang” was often role-related. Dykedike and butch were used to signify “masculine” Lesbians who wore “men’s clothing” (Stanley, June 24, 1977; Aldrich 1955:54). “Feminine” Lesbians were femmes or fluffs (Vice Versa I:6, November 1947). Among Midwest Black Lesbians the

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* Earlier, at the turn of the century, dyke was one of many slang terms denoting the vulva (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904:338).
** See “Sexist Slang and the Gay Community: Are You One, Too? by Julia (Stanley) Penelope and Susan W. Robbins.
*** Currently, there are several theories concerning the etymology of dyke or dike, which are threaded together by the androgynous concept of the “manly-woman.”
words *stud* and *fisht* were used respectively (Sawyer 1965). Special terms indicating varying degrees of “manneliness” were formed by adding prefixes, for example: *bull-dike, diesel dyke, stompin’ diesel dyke.*

As Lesbian linguist Julia Stanley indicates, *dyke* in our own time, the Lesbian/Feminist seventies, has undergone a change in meaning from a once pejorative term to a politically charged definition. This has occurred within the liberation movements of Lesbians and gays. “To be a dyke or a faggot,” writes Julia, “refers to one’s political identity as a gay activist... but redefining old terms that have been pejoratives for so long is not an easy process, nor is it something that takes place overnight. Among women, new definitions are being made among usages of old terms. As we redefine the old pejorative labels making them our own, what we choose to call ourselves also takes on political meaning, defining one’s political position” (Stanley 1974:390-391).

The personal is political. The personal is also historical. On many levels we Lesbians today have experienced historical/political transformations. Sometimes it is possible to recall an exact time and place where transformations occurred. Although I don’t ever recall having used the word *dyke* in the old pejorative sense, I do remember when I first began using *dyke* in a liberated sense. It was late 1973; I had just come out via the Lesbian/Feminist Movement. During a conversation with an older Lesbian friend who had come out years earlier without the aid of a movement, I referred to the two of us as *dykes.* Her reaction was equivalent to “Hey, wait a minute! Watch yer mouth!” as if I had uttered some terrible obscenity. She then proceeded to enlighten me as to the older, negative meaning. But, I said I don’t see it that way at all. To me *dyke* is positive; it means a strong, independent Lesbian who can take care of herself. As I continued with the movement, *dyke* took on even stronger political implications than “activist.” It signified woman-identified culture, identity, pride and strength — women, alone and together, who live consciously and deliberately autonomous lives, no longer seeking definitions or approvals according to male values. Soon my older friend also began identifying positively with the word *dyke.*

Exercising this new power of self-definition, we now have a variety of names and definitions with which to describe our many political selves. Our Lesbian lifestyle is very diverse, and our use of language and choice of names and definitions reflect our many cultural, racial, ethnic, class, regional and political backgrounds, as

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*Lesbian poet Judy Grahn theorizes that bull-dike derives from the Celtic warrior queen, Boudica, who fought the Romans in 61 A.D. (Grahn 1984: Ch.6)*
well as our generational perspectives. Today the straight world continues to use dyke in the old pejorative sense. There are a number of Lesbians who do also. These Lesbians may not have been exposed to the current movement, or, being concerned with their status and survival in the straight world, they may reject the term as harmful. There is also a segment of the Lesbian population which grew up, came out, and participated in the earlier Lesbian culture before 1970 who retain the negative definition they have always known. So the definition of dyke has changed only for some Lesbians, not for all.

There are some questions to be wondered about. If dyke has different definitions today, is it possible that there were different definitions in earlier times? Did all Lesbians before the 1970s generally define dyke negatively? Was it such a distasteful term, or were there those Lesbians who felt a sense of pride at being labeled dyke? What did it mean to them? Where did the American tradition of the “mannish” Lesbian as dikel/dyke come from?

Poet Elsa Gidlow raises the possibility that the word dyke may have had its origins in the Greek word dike, that is Athene, the “manly-woman” who is the principle of total order (Stanley, June 24, 1977). There is also the related Flexner and Wentworth (1975) hypothesis that dike probably came from hermaphroditic, the -dite being “clipped” off and later evolving into dike, due to a regional (Coney Island??) mispronunciation. Cordova adds support to this hypothesis when she reports conversations with older Lesbians who indicate the folk belief that the root word of dyke was once hermaphroditic, with its origins in the Greek myth of Hermes and Aphrodite who join to create the androgynous creature (Cordova 1974:22). Of the -dite to dike theory, Julia Stanley comments: “For reasons of my own, I’ve never bought the -dite to dike explanation, primarily because /t/ hardly ever becomes /k/ in natural languages. I’m not saying it’s impossible, especially in an unstressed syllable, where an alveolar might be heard as a velar, just that it’s unlikely” (Stanley, June 24, 1977).

My own recent research has turned up an interesting, but never before cited, usage of dike dating from late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, representing another possible, and perhaps more viable, origin, based in the social customs of the people rather than in classical allusion. Both Schele de Vere (1871) and Clapin (1902) in their compilations of Americanisms indicate dike as denoting a man in full dress, or merely the set of male clothing itself. Schele de Vere says this is a “peculiar American cant term, as yet unexplained.” Clapin, however, indicates that dike likely resulted from the corrup-
tion of the Old English *dīght* (Anglo-Saxon origin). *Dīght* meant to dress, clothe; to adorn, deck oneself (Johnson, 2nd ed., 1827). In listing *dīke*, Mathews (1951) indicates a possible connection between *dīght* and the English dialect *dīck*, both of which meant “to deck or adorn.” By 1856 *dīght* was cited by Hall as being nearly obsolete in the United States, while *diked* and *diked out* were in use. The word *dīke* probably came to America with the English at the time of colonization, but once in America other usages may have developed. Both Clapin and Schele de Vere indicate that *dīke* was not only used as a verb, but also as a noun to describe a person of either sex who was all dressed up. However, *dīke* as a person or as a set of clothing most often referred to the male sex.

There is growing evidence that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of women in both the United States and Europe were adopting male attire, both permanently and on occasion. Katz has called some of these women “Passing Women” (Katz 1976: Ch.3). These women dressed, lived, voted, worked—literally “passed” — as men in the mainstream culture. Some were of the middle and upper classes, or were artists. Others were independent, working class women who took on the guise of men in order to survive in a world where women had few options. As “men,” these women, some of whom were Lesbians, married other women and raised families. They could live and enjoy their lives with women and still participate in the greater opportunities and privileges awarded to men. This choice was often based in explicit or covert feminism. When discovered, however, these women were often punished by society — arrested, fined, imprisoned, exposed, and forbidden to wear male clothing. Sometimes the contemporary media picked up on the appearances of these “she-men,” and a number of rather sensational articles appeared, accompanied by photographs and drawings. Some of these graphics which are reproduced in Katz indicate women dressed in a “full set of male clothing” — from hat to suit to cane or umbrella, watch fobs and chains, to vests and shoes. Lesbians and other radical women — such as the feminist Mary C. Walker, Harriet Hosmer, and Edmonia Lewis, the Black/Native American sculptor — were also dressing in much the same manner in the United States and Europe, not especially for the purpose of “passing” as *men*, but for the real and implied emotional, political, and social freedoms inherent in the male costume. This radical expression of emancipation (which has centuries of tradition behind it) continued well into the twentieth century and included both women of color and white women.
It seems possible that in the American culture where the term *dike* denoted “the full set of male clothing” or “a man in full dress,” this term could also have been applied to *women* who dressed in such clothing. Possibly these early radical women, dressing and passing in male clothing, both permanently and on occasion, were in fact our first *dike* sisters in America.

Again, Julia Stanley, who feels that the above etymology for *dyke* is the most viable she has heard, comments: “Your proposed etymology doesn’t exclude the possibility that Wentworth and Flexner were correct in their hypothesis. That is, you may have come up with the ‘missing link’ in the semantic development of the word *dyke*, since it is stretching it a bit to relate it to the Germanic *ditch*” (Stanley, June 24, 1977).

If my hypothesis is correct, it could further be proposed that the meaning of *dike* was changing during the time period from the late nineteenth century to circa 1920s-1940s; that *dike* had begun passing from a predominantly positive male and/or neutral meaning to a derogatory femaleslang term. Linguistically, it may have gone through a process called “degeneration of meaning.” By the 1930s *dike*, preceded by the equally tabooed *bull*, had been assigned sexual and derogatory meanings which could be applied both to Lesbians and to heterosexual women practicing tabooed sexual behaviors. By the 1940s-1950s-1960s the pejorative term *dike*/*dyke* was almost exclusively applied to “masculine” Lesbians, with other meanings becoming more obscure, though not yet obsolete. Linguists have found that this “process of degeneration” is a pattern often occurring to words which make such a male to female transition.

For this same period of possible linguistic change, there is growing evidence indicating a general altering of attitudes toward women’s relationships with each other.* Increasingly more negative aspects were being assigned to such relationships in the twentieth century than had been assigned them in the nineteenth century. Medical and psychiatric science was labeling such relationships “unnatural,” “degenerate” and “sick.” All manner of “masculine” characteristics of both a biological and psychological nature were attached to Lesbian women, as well as to other women who “deviated” from traditional, “godgiven,” (male-defined) “female roles.” Speculating once again — since words and their meanings are used to reinforce the values of

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a given society, it may be that the linguistic change described above was related to the social/political change concerning definitions of Lesbianism and female sex roles. If a concept is assigned negative values, then the language used to describe that concept will also assume negative meaning. The language becomes a vehicle by which the value is perpetuated. Thus *dike*, once used to describe a well-dressed male, becomes a vulgar and hateful epithet to be hurled at women who rebel against confining roles and dress styles.

It is interesting to note how our “new” radical definitions echo the “old” radical traditions as signified by the term *dike/gyke.* Betty Birdfish, a friend in Chicago, wrote to me about a Lesbian dance to be held there, and how “wimmin are talking about ‘dyking themselves up’ for it.” In my next letter, I asked Betty exactly what that meant — “dyking ourselves up.” She responded:

About ‘dyking ourselves up’: I think it can mean a whole lot of things. In general, dressing up so one feels most beautiful, most proud of herself. I’ve seen that take many forms in the dyke community, at events. For example, Allison with her hair in corn rows and beads, wearing African garb. Or Jogie with a tuxedo and panama hat. Or Beverly looking like a gypsy with loose-flowing clothes, jewelry, scarves and wearing scented oil. Or wimmin with tailored blazers and slacks and vests. Or even wimmin with long-flowing ankle length skirts or dresses. Many interpretations. Many expressions. For me, ‘dyking up’ means the tailored suit: elegant, comfortable and strong. I guess I don’t see this wear as just a ‘masculine’ privilege — but clothing that wimmin/dykes can wear to feel good in. I think I’m no longer as afraid of feeling ‘butchy’: to work on my body, to develop muscles and strength, to be more active physically (sports, karate, etc.), to move with more force, strength, confidence. I’m realizing how stifled I’ve been by society which condemns this development in wimmin. And I realize how our own dyke community continues to condemn it by labelling it ‘butchy’ and therefore ‘male-identified’ and therefore wrong. I don’t care anymore (in my head — but not yet in my gut) about all those condemnations — I want to grow in ways I know I’ve always wanted to.

(Betty Birdfish, August 4, 1977)

For the Lesbian of yesteryear, getting “diked up” may have had the same exhilarating, liberating and fearful effects it has for contemporary Lesbians, but even more so since few women at that time wore pants. To wear “male clothing” before the advent of trousers for women and the so-called “unisex” fashions of today, was indeed radical and revolutionary. It signified a rebellion against male-defined
roles for women, which “women’s clothing” symbolized and perpetuated by rendering women passive, dependent, confined, and vulnerable. Yet this autonomous act of rebellion also made women vulnerable to punishment, ridicule, and ostracism.*

_Dike/dyke_ need not remain a vulgar epithet of self-hate, shame, and negativism, a term signifying “masculine.” This is the definition which a heterosexist, dyke-hating society has formulated and which many Lesbians past and present have unquestioningly accepted. By defining some of us as “men” and some of us as “women,” society has sought to divide us, to create inequality based on heterosexual roles, thereby defusing the political power of _women loving women_ , reducing it to a pseudo-heterosexuality which, according to their thinking, is both artificial and inferior to the “real thing.” _Dike/dyke_ still remains a word hidden in history. But this new etymology suggests the possibility of some quite radical origins. Rather than wincing at the word _dyke_, we might better remember and commemorate those early Lesbians and feminists who refused “women’s clothing” and “women’s roles.” They may have been our first dyke sisters.

* It should be noted that these vulnerabilities were not experienced by women only in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As late as 1968, Lesbians were being arrested in Dallas and Houston, Texas for wearing “men’s clothing.” See: “Special Release to the Ladder.” _The Ladder_ 13:1/2 (October/November 1968):40-41; “Who Can Tell Boys from Girls.” _The Ladder_ 13:1/2 (October/November 1968):41-42.
SOURCES

Hargan, James. "The Psychology of Prison Language." Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 30 (1935): 359-365. (Note: the "more unprintable expressions such as bull-dike were omitted from the published list, but were available upon request to those who were "especially interested in the subject.")
Vice Versa 1:6 (November 1947). (Includes discussion of role-related slang; examined by Elizabeth Bouvier at the Homosexual Information Center Library, Hollywood, Calif.)