"Imagine My Surprise":
Women's Relationships in Historical Perspective*

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When Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," appeared in the pages of Signs in 1975, it revolutionized the way in which women's historians look at nineteenth-century American society and even served notice on the historical profession at large that women's relationships would have to be taken into account in any consideration of Victorian society.1 Since then we have learned more about relationships between women in the past, but we have not reached consensus on the issue of characterizing these relationships.2 On the one hand, Smith-Rosenberg's work has increasingly been misused to deny the sexual aspect of relationships between prominent women in the past. On the other hand, feminist scholars have responded to such distortions by bestowing the label "lesbian" on women who would themselves not have used the term. The issue goes beyond labels, however, because the very nature of women's relationships is so complex. I would like to consider here the issue of women's relationships in historical perspective by reviewing the conflicting approaches, by presenting examples of different kinds of women's relationships from my own research on the American women's movement in the 1940's and 1950's, and finally, by suggesting a conceptual approach that recognizes the complexity of women's relationships without denying the common bond shared by all women who have committed their lives to other women in the past.

Looking first at what Blanche Cook proclaims "the historical denial of lesbianism," we find the most recent, most publicized, and most egregious example in Doris Faber's The Life of Lorena Hickok: E.R.'s Friend, the story of the relationship of Eleanor Roosevelt and reporter Lorena Hickok.3 The Hickok book would make fascinating material for a case study of homophobia. Author Doris Faber presents page after page of evidence that delineates the growth and development of a love affair between the two women, yet she steadfastly maintains that a woman of Eleanor Roosevelt's "stature" could not have acted on the love which she expressed for Hickok. This attitude forces Faber to go to great lengths with the evidence before her. For example, she quotes a letter Roosevelt wrote to Hickok and asserts that it is "particularly susceptible to misinterpretation." Roosevelt's wish to "lie down beside you tonight & take you in my arms," Faber claims represents maternal—"albeit rather extravagantly" maternal—solicitude. For Faber, "there can be little doubt that the final sentence of the above letter does not mean what it appears to mean."4 Faber's interpretation, unfortunately, is not an isolated one. She acknowledges an earlier "sensitive" and "fine" book, Miss Marks and Miss Woolley, for reinforcing her own views "regarding the unfairness of using contemporary standards to characterize the behavior of women brought up under almost inconceivably different standards."5 Anna Mary Wells, the

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FRONTIERS Vol. V, No. 3 F 1981 FRONTIERS Editorial Collective

261
author of the Marks and Woolley book, set out originally to write a biography of Mary Woolley and almost aban-
donned the plan when she discovered the love letters of the two women. Ultimately Wells went ahead with a book about the relationship, but only after she decided, as she explains in the preface, that there was no physical relationship between them. Comforted by this conviction, Wells paints a detailed picture of the joys and sorrows of their life together, even acknowledging the role that hostility toward their relationship played in the careers of both women.

Another famous women's college president, M. Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr, receives the same sort of treatment in a book that appeared at the same time as the Hickok book, but to less fanfare. The discovery of the Woolley-Kossuth letters sparked a mild panic among Mount Holyoke alumnae and no doubt created apprehension about what might lurk in Thomas' papers, which were about to be microfilmed and opened to the public. But Marjorie Dobkin, editor of The Making of a Feminist: Early Journals and Letters of M. Carey Thomas, insists that there is nothing to worry about.

Thomas admittedly fell for women throughout her life. At fifteen, she wrote: "I think I must feel towards Anna for instance like a boy would, for I admire her so. Not any particular thing but just an undefined sense of admiration and then I like to touch her and the other morning I woke up and she was asleep and I admired her hair so much that I kissed it. I never felt so much with anybody else." And at twenty: "One night we had stopped reading later than usual and obeying a sudden impulse I turned to her and asked, 'Do you love me?' She threw her arms around me and whispered, 'I love you passionately.' She did not go home that night and we talked and talked." At twenty-three, Thomas wrote to her mother: "If it were only possible for women to elect women as well as men for a 'life's love!'... It is possible but if families would only regard it in that light!"

Thomas did in fact choose women for her "life's loves," but Dobkin, who finds it "hard to understand why anyone should care very much" about personal and private behavior and considers the question of lesbianism "a relatively inconsequential matter," assures us that "physical contact" unquestionably played a part in Thomas' relationships with women, but "sexuality" just as unquestionably did not. Along with this laborious distinction between "physical contact" and "sexuality," Dobkin presents a battery of reasons why Thomas was not a lesbian: she never expressed the desire to be a man; she expressed a strong aversion to heterosexual intercourse when she learned the "facts of life" from a book at the age of twenty-one, an aversion, Dobkin insists, that would have applied even more strongly to homosexual sex; she was conventional in everything but her feminism; she once loved a man—or was at least unable to stop thinking about him—and considered marrying him (Dobkin, with evident confidence, devotes the middle section of the book to this relationship); Thomas established mother-daughter relationships with the two women with whom she lived (one moved in when the first eloped with a man); the women known at the time to be lesbians whom Thomas included among her friends traveled with her only after Thomas was already approaching old age. In short, finally, Dobkin's ignorance about lesbianism is staggering; no other topic would a scholar so unfamiliar with the relevant literature forge ahead with the sort of assumptions she reveals.

The authors of these three books are determined to give us an "acceptable" version of women's relationships in the past, and they seize gratefully on Smith-Rosenberg's work to do it. But even Doris Faber's feverish denials could not eliminate public speculation about Eleanor Roosevelt's "sexual orientation." An article about the Hickok book was even carried in the National Enquirer which, for a change, probably presented the material more accurately, if more luridly, than the respectable press.  

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in The New York Times Book Review, for example, notes that the big question in "some people's minds" will be whether Hickok and Roosevelt were "lovers in the physical sense." Schlesinger, like Dobkin, finds this an "issue of stunning inconsequence," but he "reluctantly" poses that it must be discussed. After devoting the rest of his review to a subject he evidently finds distasteful, he cites Smith-Rosenberg's work and concludes that the two women were "children of the Victorian age" which accepted celibate love between women; that they were "wounded women, doomed by chaotic childhoods to the unceasing quest for unattainable emotional security." Schlesinger is emphasizing here the incompleteness of our modern heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy with the sensibility of an earlier age. As Blanche Cook points out in her review of Faber's book, however, it is absurd to pretend that the years 1932 to 1962 now belong to the nineteenth century. Although it is vitally important not to impose modern concepts and standards on the past, I believe that we have gone entirely too far with the notion of an idyllic Victorian age in which chaste love between people of the same sex was possible and acceptable. A recent review in The New York Times Book Review, for example, discusses a biography of J. M. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, and almost congratulates Barrie for his "innocent, asexual, natural and dignified" love for the five boys who were both subjects and recipients of his stories. Despite the fact that Barrie was fond of photographing the boys, as the reviewer says, "not nude, often bottoms up," he insists that there was nothing sexual about this love. I think that we are naive to believe this.

It is not surprising, in light of such denials of sexuality, that many feminist scholars choose to claim as lesbians all women who have loved women in the past. Blanche Cook concludes firmly that "women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians." Cook names as lesbians Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, who lived for forty years with Mary Rozet Smith; Lillian Wald, also a settlement house pioneer, who left
evidence of a series of intense relationships with women; and Jeannette Marks and Mary Woolley. All, Cook says, were lesbians, and in the homopobic society in which we live must be claimed as such.

At it now stands, we are faced with a choice between, on the one hand, labeling women lesbians who might violently reject the label, or, on the other hand, glossing over the significance of women's relationships by labeling them Victorian, and therefore innocent of our post-Freudian sexual awareness. Although I understand, and share the political perspective that leads Cook to claim women like Jane Addams as lesbians, I feel we need to see more precision in the use of the term. I would like to illustrate the diversity of women's relationships in the past—and the complexity of those relationships—without evidence from the American women's movement in the late 1940's and 1950's.

I have found evidence of a variety of relationships in collections of women's papers and in the records of women's organizations from this period. I do not have enough information about many of these relationships to characterize them in any definitive way, nor can I even offer much information about some of the women. But we cannot afford to overlook whatever evidence women have left us, however fragmentary, I believe that it is important simply to present some of these relationships, because they illustrate the complexity of women's relationships in the past and the problems that confront us if we attempt any simple categorization. Since my research focuses on feminist activities, the women I discuss here are by no means a representative group of women. All of them were white, educated, middle- or upper-class. The women's movement in the period after the Second World War was composed primarily of middle-class women, in part because of the racism and classism of the movement, and in part because black women and working-class women involved in social movement activity most often organized around issues of race and class, respectively, not gender.

Within the women's movement were two distinct phenomena—couple relationships and intense devotion to a charismatic leader—that help clarify the problems that face us if we attempt to define these relationships in any cut-and-dried fashion. None of the women who lived in couple relationships and belonged to the women's movement in the postwar period would, as far as can be determined, have identified themselves as lesbians. They did, however, often live together in long-term committed relationships, which were accepted in the movement, and they did sometimes build a community with other women like themselves. Descriptions of a few relationships that come down to us in the sources provide some insight into their nature.

Jeannette Marks and Mary Woolley, subjects of the biography mentioned earlier, met at Wellesley College in 1895 when Marks began her college education and Woolley arrived at the college as a history instructor. Less than five years later they made "a mutual declaration of ardent and exclusive love" and "exchanged tokens, a ring and a jeweled pin, with pledges of lifelong fidelity." They spent the rest of their lives together, including the many years at Mount Holyoke where Woolley served as president and Marks taught English. Mary Woolley worked in the National Association of University Women and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Jeannette Marks committed herself to suffrage and, later, through the National Woman's Party, to the Equal Rights Amendment. It is clear from Marks' correspondence with women in the movement that their relationship was accepted as a primary commitment. Few letters to Marks in the 1940's fail to inquire about Woolley, and Woolley's illness clouded Marks' life and work. One married woman, who found herself forced to withdraw from Woman's Party work because of her husband's health, acknowledged in a letter to Marks the centrality of Marks' and Woolley's commitment when she compared her own reason for "pulling out" to "those that have bound you to Westport," the town in which the two women lived. Mary Woolley died in 1947, and Jeannette Marks lived on until 1964, devoting herself to a biography of Woolley.

Lena Madesin Phillips, the founder of both the National and International Federations of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, lived for some thirty years with Marjory Lacey-Baker, an actress whom she first met in 1919. In an unpublished autobiography included in Phillips' papers, she straightforwardly wrote about her lack of interest in men and marriage. As a young girl, she wrote that she "cared little for boys," and at the age of seven she wrote a composition for school that explained: "There are so many little girls in the school and the thing I [sic] like about it there are no boys in school. I [sic] like that about it."

She noted that she had never taken seriously the idea of getting married. "Only the first of the half dozen proposals of marriage which came my way had any sense of reality to me. They made no impression because I was wholly without desire or even interest in the matter." Phillips seemed unperturbed by possible Freudian and/or homophobic explanations of her attitudes and behavior. She explained unabashedly that she wanted to be a boy and suffered severe disappointment when she learned that, contrary to her father's stories, there was no factory in Indiana that made girls into boys—and seemed impervious as well to the charges of lesbianism that her memories might provoke. She mentioned in her autobiography the "crushes" she had on girls at the Jessamine Female Institute—nothing out of the ordinary for a young woman of her generation, but perhaps a surprising piece of information chosen for inclusion in the autobiography of a woman who continued to devote her emotional energies to women.

In 1919, Phillips attended a pageant in which Lacey-Baker performed and she inquired about the identity of the woman who had "[t]he most beautiful voice I ever heard." Phillips "lost her heart to the sound of that voice," and the two women moved in together in the 1920's. In 1924, according to notes that Lacey-Baker recorded for a biography of Phillips, the two women went to different places for Easter; recording this caused Lacey-Baker to quote from The Prophet: "Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation." Phillips described Lacey-Baker in her voluminous cor-
responde as "my best friend," or noted that she "shares a home with me."20 Phillips' friends and acquaintances regularly mentioned Lacey-Baker. One male correspondent, for example, commented that Phillips' "lady-friend" was "so lovely, and so devoted to you and cares for you."21 Phillips happily described the tranquility of their life together to her many friends: "Marjory and I have had a lovely time, enjoying once more our home in summertime... Marjory would join in the invitation of this letter and this loving greeting if she were around. Today she is busy with the cleaning woman, while I sit with the door closed working in my study."22 "We have had a happy winter, with good health for both of us. We have a variety of interests and small obligings, but really all we do is to enjoy the quiet and comfort of Apple Acres."23 "We read and talk and work."24

Madelein Phillips' papers suggest that she and Marjory Lacey-Baker lived in a world of politically active women friends. Phillips had devoted much of her energy to international work with women, and she kept in touch with European friends through her correspondence and through her regular trips to Europe accompanied by Lacey-Baker. Gordon Holmes, of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women, wrote regularly to "Madesin and Maggie." In a 1948 letter she teased Phillips by reporting that "two other of our oldest and closest Fed officers whom you know could get married but are refusing—as they are both more than middle-aged (never mind their looks) it suggests 50-60 is about the new dangerous age for women (look out for Maggie)."25 Phillips reported to Holmes on their social life: "With a new circle of friends around us here and a good many of our overseas members coming here for luncheon or tea with us the weeks slip by."26 The integral relationship between Phillips' social life and her work in the movement is suggested by Lacey-Baker's analysis of Phillips' personal papers from the year 1934: "There is the usual crop of letters to LMP following the Convention [of the BPFW] from newly-met members in her newspaper column—most of whom went on to be her good friends over the years."27 Lacey-Baker was a part of Phillips' movement world, and their relationship received acceptance and validation throughout the movement, both national and international.

The lifelong relationship between feminist biographer Alma Lutz and Marguerite Smith began when they roomed together at Vassar in the early years of the twentieth century. From 1918 until Smith's death in 1959, they shared a Boston apartment and a summer home, Highmeadow, in the Berkshires. Lutz and Smith, a librarian at the Protestant Zion Research Library in Brookline, Massachusetts, worked together in the National Woman's Party. Like Madelein Phillips, Lutz wrote to friends in the movement of their lives together: "We are very happy here in the country—each busy with her work and digging in the garden."28 They traveled together, visiting Europe several times in the 1950's. Letters to one of them about feminist work invariably sent greetings or love to the other. When Smith died in 1959, Lutz struggled with her grief. She wrote to her acquaintance Florence Kitchelt, in response to condolences: "I am at Highmeadow trying to get my bearings... You will understand how hard it is... It has been a very difficult anxious time for me."29 She thanked another friend for her note and added: "It's a hard adjustment to make, but one we all have to face in one way or another and I am finding that I have much to be grateful for."30 In December she wrote to one of her regular correspondents that she was carrying on but it was very lonely for her.31

The fact that Lutz and Smith seemed to have many friends who lived in couple relationships with other women suggests that they had built a community of women within the women's movement. Every year Mabel Vernon, a suffragist and worker for peace, and her friend and companion Consuelo Reyes, whom Vernon had met through her work with the Inter-American Commission on Women, spent the summer at Highmeadow. Vernon, one of Alice Paul's closest associates during the suffrage struggle, had met Reyes two weeks after her arrival in the United States from Costa Rica in 1942. They began to work together in Vernon's organization, People's Mandate, in 1943, and they shared a Washington apartment from 1951 until Vernon's death in 1975.32 Reyes received recognition in Vernon's obituaries as her "devoted companion" or "nurse-companion."33 Two other women who also maintained a lifelong relationship, Alice Morgan Wright and Edith Goode, also kept in contact with Lutz, Smith, Vernon, and Reyes. Sometimes they visited Highmeadow in the summer.34 Wright and Goode had met at Smith and were described as "always together" although they did not live together.35 Like Lutz and Smith, they worked together in the National Woman's Party, traveled together and looked after each other as old age began to take its toll.36

These examples illustrate what the sources provide: the bare outlines of friendship networks made up of woman-committed women. Much of the evidence must be pieced together and it is even scantier when the women did not live together. Alma Lutz's papers, for example, do not include any personal correspondence from the postwar period, so what we know about her relationships with Marguerite Smith comes from the papers of her correspondents. Sometimes a relationship surfaces only upon the death of one of the women. For example, Agnes Wells, chairman of the National Woman's Party in the late 1940's, explained to an acquaintance in the Party that her "friend of forty-one years and house-companion for twenty-eight years" had just died.37 When Mabel Griswold, executive secretary of the Woman's Party, died in 1955, a family member suggested that the Party send the telegram of sympathy to Elsie Wood, the woman with whom Griswold had lived. 38 This kind of reference tells us little about the nature of the relationship involved, but we do get a sense of the nature of couple relationships within the women's movement.

A second important phenomenon found in the women's movement—the charismatic leader who attracts intense devotion—also adds to our understanding of the complexity of women's relationships. Alice Paul, the founder and leading light of the National Woman's
Party, inspired devotion that bordered on worship. One woman even addressed her as “My Beloved Deity.”49 But, contrary to both the ideal type of the charismatic leader and the portrait of Paul as it exists now in the historical scholarship, Paul maintained close relationships with a number of women she had first met in the suffrage struggle.50 Paul’s correspondence in the National Woman’s Party papers does not reveal much about the nature of her relationships, but it does make it clear that her friendships provided love and support for her work.

It is true that many of the expressions of love, admiration, and devotion addressed to Paul seem to have been one-sided, from awestruck followers, but this is not the only side of the story. Paul maintained close friendships with a number of women discussed earlier who lived in couple relationships with other women. She had met Mabel Vernon when they attended Swarthmore College together, and they maintained contact throughout the years, despite Vernon’s departure from the Woman’s Party in the 1930s.51 Of Alice Morgan Wright, she said that, when they first met, they “...just became sisters right away.” Jeanette Marks regularly sent her love to “dear Alice” until a conflict in the Woman’s Party ruptured their relationship.52 Other women, too, enjoyed a closer relationship than the formal work-related one for which Paul is so well known.

Paul obviously cared deeply, for example, for her old friend Nina Allender, the cartoonist of the suffrage movement. Allender, who lived alone in Chicago, wrote to Paul in 1947 of her memories of their long association. “No words can tell you what that [first] visit grew to mean to me & to my life...I feel now as I did then—only more intensely—I have never changed or doubted—but have grown more inspired as the years have gone by... There is no use going into words. I believe them to be unnecessary between us.”53 Paul wrote that she thought of Allender often and sent her “devoted love.”54 She worried about Allender’s loneliness and gently encouraged her to come to Washington to live at Belmont House, the Woman’s Party headquarters, where she would be surrounded by loving friends who appreciated the work she had done for the women’s movement.55 Paul failed to persuade her to move, however. Two years later Paul responded to a request from Allender’s niece for help with the costs of a nursing home with a $100 check and a promise to contact others who might be able to help. But Allender died, within a month, at the age of eighty-five.

Paul does not seem to have formed an intimate relationship with any one woman, but she did live and work within a close-knit female world. When in Washington, she lived, at least some of the time, at Belmont House; when away she lived either alone or with her sister, Helen Paul, in Vermont and later Connecticut. Helen Paul, through her relationship with Alice, often played a major role in Woman’s Party work. It is clear that Alice Paul’s ties—whether to her sister or to close friends or to admirers—served as a bond that knit the Woman’s Party together. That Paul and her network could also tear the movement asunder is obvious from the stormy history of the Woman’s Party.

Alice Paul is not the only example of a leader who inspired love and devotion among women in the movement. One senses from Marjory Lacey-Baker’s comments, quoted above—that “newly-met members in hero-worshiping mood” wrote to Lena Madsen Philips after every BPW convention—that Philips too had a charismatic aura. But the best and most thoroughly documented example of a charismatic leader is Anna Lord Strauss of the League of Women Voters, an organization that opted out of the women’s movement.

Strauss, the great-granddaughter of Lucretia Mott, came from an old and wealthy family; she was prominent and respected, a staunch liberal and an anti—or at best a nonfeminist. She never married and her letters leave no evidence of intimate relationships outside her family. Yet Strauss was the object of some very strong feelings on the part of the women with whom she worked. She, like Alice Paul and Madsen Philips, received numerous hero-worshipping letters from awestruck followers. But in her case we also have evidence that some of her coworkers fell deeply in love with her. It is hard to know how the following women would have interpreted their relationship with Strauss. The two women who expressed their feelings explicitly were both married women, and in one case Strauss obviously had a cordial relationship with the woman’s husband and children. Yet there can be no question that this League officer fell in love with Strauss. She found Strauss “the finest human being I had ever known,” and knowing her “the most beautiful and profound experience I have ever had.” Strauss—she asked permission to say it—made “the earth move and ‘the whole landscape of human affairs and nature’ take on a new appearance.” Strauss made “the tone and fiber” of her day different; although she could live without her, she would see no reason for having to prove it all the time.56 She tried to “ration and control” her thoughts of Strauss, but it was small satisfaction.57 When Strauss was recovering from an operation, this woman wrote: “I love you! I can’t imagine the world without you...I love you. I need you.”

Although our picture of this relationship is completely one-sided—for Strauss did not keep copies of most of her letters—it is clear that Strauss did not respond to such declarations of love. This woman urged Strauss to accept her and what she had to say without “the slightest sense of needing to be considered or the fact that I feel as I do.” She understood the “unilateral character” of her feelings, and insisted that she had more than she deserved by simply knowing Strauss at all.58 But her hurt, and her growing suspicion that Strauss shunned intimacy, escaped on occasion. She asked: “And how would it hurt you to let someone tell you sometime how beautiful—how wonderful you are? Did you ever let anyone have a decent chance to try?”59 She realized that loving someone did not always make things easier—that sometimes, in fact, it made life more of a struggle—but she believed that to withdraw from love was to withdraw from life. In what appears to have been a hastily written note, she expressed her understanding—an understanding that obviously gave her both pain and comfort—that Strauss was not perfect.
after all: "Way back there in the crow's nest (or at some such time) you decided not to become embroiled in any intimate human relationship, except those you were, by birth, committed to, I wonder. There is something you haven't mastered, something you've been afraid of all along."

This woman's perception that Strauss avoided intimacy is confirmed elsewhere in Strauss' papers. One old friend was struck, in 1968, by Strauss' ability to "get your feelings out & down on paper!" She continued: "I know you so well that I consider this great progress in your own inner state of mental health. It is far from easy for you to express your feelings... This aspect of Strauss' personality fits with the ideal type of the charismatic leader. The other case of a woman falling in love with Strauss that emerges clearly from her papers reinforces this picture. This woman, also a League officer, wrote in circumspect fashion of her intense pleasure at receiving Strauss' picture. In what was certainly a reference to lesbianism, she wrote that she hoped Strauss would not think that she was "one of those who had never outgrown the emotional extravaganzas of the adolescent." Before she got down to League business, she added:

But, Darling, as I softly close the door on all this—as I should and as I want to—and as must since all our meetings are likely to be formal ones in a group—as I go back in the office correspondence to "Dear Miss Strauss" and "Sincerely yours," as I put myself as much as possible in the background at our March meeting in order to share you with the others who have not been with you as I have—all these things happen, I want you to be very certain that what is merely under cover is still there—as it most surely will be—and that if all the hearts in the room could be exposed there'd be few, I'm certain, that would love you more than..."

Apparently Strauss never responded to this letter, for a month later, this woman apologized for writing it: "I have had qualms, dear Anna, about that letter I wrote you. (You knew I would eventually of course)."

Continuing in a vein that reinforces the above quoted perception of Strauss' inability to be intimate, she wrote of imagining the "recollection...embarrassment, self-consciousness and general discomfort" her letter must have provoked in such a "reserved person." She admitted that the kind of admiration she had expressed, "at least in certain classes of relationships (of which mine to you is one)—becomes a bit of moral wrongdoing." She felt ashamed and asked forgiveness. It is not at all clear what she meant by all of this, and I quote it here without speculating on the nature of their relationship.

What is clear is that this was a momentous and significant relationship to at least one of the parties. Almost twenty years later, this woman wrote of her deep disappointment in missing Strauss' visit to her city. She had allowed herself to dream that she could persuade Strauss to stay with her awhile, even though she knew that others would have prior claims on Strauss' time. She wrote:

"I have not seen you since that day in Atlantic City when... you laid the gavel of the League of Women Voters down.... I do not look back on that afternoon ending with any satisfaction for my own behavior, for I issued right by the platform on which you were still standing talking with one of the last persons left in the room and shyness at the thought of expressing my deep feeling about your going—and the fact that you were talking with someone else led me to pass on without even a glance in your direction as I remember though you made some move to speak to me!... But if I gave you a hurt it is now a very old one and forgotten, I'm sure—as well as understood." Whatever the interpretation these two women would have devised to explain their feelings for Strauss, it is clear that the widely shared devotion to this woman leader could sometimes grow into something more intense. Strauss' reserve, and her inability to express her feelings may or may not have had anything to do with her own attitude toward intimate relationships between women. One tantalizing letter from a friend about to be married suggests that Strauss' decision not to marry had been made early: "I remember so well your answer when I pressed you, once, on why you had never married.... Well, it is very true, one does not marry unless one can see no other life." A further fragment, consisting of entries in the diary of Doris Stevens—a leading suffragist who took a sharp swing to the right in the postwar period—suggests at least some individuals suspected Strauss of lesbianism. Stevens, by this time a serious redoubter and, from the evidence quoted here, a "queerbarian" as well, apparently called a government official in 1953 to report that Strauss was "not a bit interested in men." She seemed to be trying to discredit Strauss, far too liberal for her tastes, with a charge of "unchristian morals." Stevens had her suspicions about other women in the movement as well. She recorded in her diary a conversation with a National Woman's Party member about Jeannette Marks and Mary Woolley, noting that the member, who had attended Wellesley with Marks, "Discretely indicated there was 'talk.'" At another point she reported a conversation with a different Woman's Party member who had grown disillusioned about Alice Paul. Stevens noted that her informant related "weird goings on at Wash, headquarters wherein it was clear she thought Paul a devotee of Lesbos & afflicted with Jeanne d'Arc identification." Stevens' charges suggest that the intensity of women's relationships and the existence of woman-committed women in women's organizations had the potential, particularly during the McCarthy years, to attract ridicule or denunciation. Stevens wrote to the viciously right-wing and anti-Semitic columnist, Westbrook Pegler, to "thank you for knowing I'm not a queerie." This would suggest that, at least in certain circles, participation in the women's movement was highly suspect. What exactly should we make of all this? In one way it is terribly frustrating to have such tantalizingly ambiguous glimpses into women's lives. In another way, it is exciting to find out so much about women's lives in the past. I think it is enormously important not to read...
into these letters what we want to find, or what we think we should find. At the same time, we cannot dismiss what little evidence we have as insufficient when it is all we have; nor can we continue to contribute to the conspiracy of silence that urges us to ignore what is not perfectly straightforward. Thus, although it is tempting to try to speculate about the relationships I have described here in order to impose some analysis on them, I would rather simply lay them out, fragmentarily as they are, in order to suggest a conceptual approach that recognizes the complexities I see in the issue.

It is clear, I think, that none of these relationships can be easily categorized. There were women who lived their entire adult lives in couple relationships with other women, and married women who fell in love with other women. Were they lesbians? Probably they would be shocked to be identified in that way. Alice Paul, for example, spoke scornfully of Ms. magazine as "all about homosexuality and so on." Another woman who lives in a couple relationship distinguished between the (respectable) women involved in the ERA struggle in the old days and the "lesbians and bra-burners" of the contemporary movement. Sasha Lewis, in Sunday's Women, reports an incident we would do well to remember here. One of her informants, a lesbian, went to Florida to work against Anita Bryant and stayed with an older cousin who had lived for years in a marriage-like relationship with another woman. When Lewis' informant saw the way the two women lived—sharing everything, including a bedroom—she said something to them about the danger of Bryant's campaign for their lives. They were aghast that she would think them lesbians, since, they said, they did not do anything sexual together. If even women who lived with or maintained close attachments to other women would reject the label "lesbian," what about the married women, or the women who avoided intimate relationships?

The fact that the three recent historical studies discussed here misinterpret the concept of women's culture to proclaim that their subjects did not have sexual relationships with other women makes it imperative that historians pull back the veil that has too often shrouded love between women in the past. But it is equally important that we not obscure the enormous significance, from both an individual and historical perspective, of the formation of a lesbian identity. Recent research on the history of homosexuality shows that the concept of a homosexual identity or role only emerged in relatively recent times. Paradoxically, as Smith-Rosenberg points out, the nineteenth century permitted a great deal of freedom in moving along the sexual and emotional continuum that ranges from heterosexuality to homosexuality. The twentieth century has not. What is important here is that we can begin to speak of a "lesbian identity" in American society by the twentieth century. Passionate love between women has always existed, but it has not always been named. Since it has been named in the twentieth century, we need to distinguish between women who identify as lesbians and/or who are part of a lesbian culture, where one exists, and a broader category of woman-committed women who would not identify as lesbians but whose primary commitment, in emotional and practical terms, was to other women. It is especially important, in considering twentieth-century women, that we not sloppily apply the label "Victorian." In the 1950's there was such a thing as a local lesbian culture—in local communities, in the bars, in the military. There is an important difference between women who put themselves in such a culture on the very fringes of society and women like Eleanor Roosevelt and the women whose relationships I have described here. Similarly, there is an important difference between a politically active lesbian feminist and a "maiden aunt" who has lived her entire life with another woman but would reject any suggestions of lesbianism.

Identity, and not sexual behavior, is the crucial factor in the discussion. There are lesbians who have never had a sexual relationship with another woman and others who are women who have had sexual experiences with women but do not identify as lesbians. This is not to suggest that there is no difference between women who loved each other and lived together but did not make love (although even that can be difficult to define, since sexuality and sexual identity, "physical contact" and "sexual contact" have no distinct boundaries) and those who did. But sexual behavior—something about which we rarely have historical evidence anyway—is only one of a number of relevant factors in a relationship. Blanche Cook has said everything that needs to be said about the inevitable question of evidence: "Genital 'proofs' to confirm lesbianism are never required to confirm the heterosexuality of men and women who live together for 20, or 50, years." Cook reminds us of the recent publicized relationship of General Eisenhower and Kay Summersby during the Second World War: they were passionately involved with each other. They looked ardent into each other's eyes. They held hands. They entered swiftly across England's countryside. They played golf and bridge and laughed. They were inseparable. But they never 'consummated' their love in the acceptable, traditional, sexual manner. Now does that fact render Kay Summersby and Dwight David Eisenhower somehow less in love? Are they not heterosexual?"

Of course, emphasizing identity rather than proof of genital contact does not make everything simple. At this point, I think, the best we can do is to describe carefully and sensitively what we do know about a woman's relationships, keeping in mind both the historical development of a lesbian identity (Did such a thing as a lesbian identity exist? Was there a lesbian culture?), and the individual process that we now identify as "coming out" (Did a woman feel attachment to another woman or women? Did she act on this feeling in some positive way? Did she recognize the existence of other women with the same commitment? Did she express solidarity with those women?). Using this approach allows us to make distinctions among women's relationships in the past—intimate friendships, supportive relationships growing out of common political work, couple relationships—without denying their significance or drawing fixed boundaries. We can recognize the importance of friendships among a group of women who, like Alma Lutz, Marguerite...
Smith, Mabel Vernon, Conuelo Reyes, Alice Morgan Wright, and Edith Goode, built a community of women but did not identify it as a lesbian community. We can do justice to both the woman-committed woman who would angrily reject any suggestion of lesbianism and the self-identified lesbian without distorting their common experiences.

This approach does not solve all the problems of dealing with women's relationships in the past, but it is a beginning. The greatest problem remains the weakness of sources. Not only do we know women who loved women in the past been widely reluctant to leave evidence of their relationships for the prying eyes of a homophobic society, but that evidence they did leave was often suppressed or destroyed. 24 Furthermore, as the three books discussed above show, even the evidence saved and brought to light can be savagely misinterpreted.

How do we know if a woman felt attachment, acted on it, recognized the existence of other women like her, or expressed solidarity? There is no easy answer to this, but it is revealing, I think, that both Doris Faber and Anna Mary Wells are fairly certain that Lorena Hickok and Jeannette Marks, respectively, did have "homosexual tendencies" (although Faber insists that each Hickok cannot fairly be placed in the "contemporary gay category"), even if the admirable figures in each book, Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary Woolley, certainly did not. That is, both of these authors, as hard as they try to deny lesbianism, find evidence that forces them to discuss it, and both cope with placing the "blame" on the women they paint as unpleasant—fat, ugly, pathetic, Loriene Hickok and nasty, tortured, arrogant Jeannette Marks.

And, of course, despite censorship, we do know about women in the past who acted on their feelings for other women and who created lesbian communities. Consider the French lesbian culture of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, the world depicted in Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness. 25 And we are beginning to learn more about working-class and middle-class lesbian communities in the 1930's as well—in the closet, in the bars, and in the military. 26

Using this approach, then, allows us to make distinctions among different sorts of women's relationships in the past without denying their significance or assigning fixed categories. Returning to the relationships described in this paper, we can differentiate between the intimate and supportive friendships, the couple relationships with other women that some women formed, and the feelings of failing in love that others expressed. I think it is important to state here that these relationships, whatever their nature, are not simply a side issue for the history of feminism and the women's movement. Blanche Cook has argued that the existence of female support networks has been vital to women's political activism; Smith-Rosenberg and others have shown how nineteenth-century "women's culture" both led to, and ultimately limited, organizing and public activity among middle-class women. 27 I believe that women's relationships have been absolutely central to the success of feminist activity throughout history. Woman-committed women have had the emotional commitment, the support, and often the time to devote their lives to a cause, as did many of the women I have discussed. It is important that nineteenth-century American women sought and found emotional support in a homosexual world. It is also important that throughout history there have been women who chose other women for the primary relationship in their lives. It is important that some of these women would have been shocked to be labeled lesbians, and it is important that some of them claimed their lesbianism and built a culture and community around it with other lesbians. It is imperative that we not deny the reality of any of these women's experiences by blurring the distinctions among them. At the same time, recognition of the common bond of commitment to women shared by diverse women throughout history strengthens our struggle against those who attempt to divide and defeat us.

NOTES

Holly Near's song, "Imagine My Surprise," celebrates the discovery of women's relationships in the past. The song is recorded on the album, Imagine My Surprise, Redwood Records. I am grateful to Holly Near and Redwood Records for their permission to use the title here.


19. Wells, p. 56.


74. The Mount Holyoke administration closed the Marks-Woolley papers when Wylls discovered the love letters, and the papers are only open to researchers now because an American Historical Association committee, including Blanche Cook as one of its members, applied pressure to keep the papers open after Wylls, to her credit, contacted them. Fader describes her unsuccessful attempts to persuade the archivists at the FDR Library to close the Lorena Hickok papers.


76. Lewis, Davis, Kennedy, and Michelson.