'THEY WONDER TO WHICH SEX I BELONG':
THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE MODERN
LESBIAN IDENTITY

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In 1884, the aging French painter, Rosa Bonheur, wrote her sister from Nice where she had gone in her usual smock and trousers to sketch:

'It amuses me to see how puzzled the people are. They wonder to which sex I belong. The ladies especially lose themselves in conjectures about "the little old man who looks so lively". The men seem to conclude: "Oh, he's some aged singer from St. Peter's at Rome, who has turned to painting in his declining years to console himself for some misfortune." And they shake their beards triumphantly.'

Bonheur's bemused description of the impact her androgynous appearance had upon the general public pinpoints many of the major difficulties historians face in reconstructing the history of the lesbian. Bonheur spent her adult life living with a woman and wearing male attire, but she used a specifically Victorian vocabulary, reveling in her gender-freedom, rather than her specific sexual identity. In describing her lifelong friendship with Nathalie Micas, Bonheur spoke appreciatively of those who understood that 'deux femmes peuvent sentir l'une pour l'autre le charme d'une amitié vive et passionnée, sans que rien n'en altère la pureté'. Did she or didn't she have an active sexual life with Micas? Was she or was she not a lesbian? Did she or did she not identify as a lesbian? Whom should we include and why in the history of the modern lesbian?

Lesbian history is in its initial stages, inhibited both by the suspect nature of the material and the small number of scholars willing and able to pursue half-forgotten, half-destroyed, or half-neglected sources. Nevertheless, the past ten years have seen an encouraging efflorescence of work, breaking from the old psycho-
logical paradigms and insisting upon the necessity of a historical understanding of women's same-sex sexual behavior. Like any new discipline, these studies have concentrated on issues of concern to those most deeply involved; for lesbians today the most important and controversial questions concern the origins of an individual and a group identity.

Contemporary lesbian history has been almost entirely written by lesbians, and often by women who are not trained and practicing historians. We have searched the past with an urgency that can only be felt by those who have been denied a history. Among the numerous and popular lesbian sessions at the Berkshire Women's History Conference in June 1987 were 'Love and Friendship in the Lesbian Bar Communities of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s', 'The Evolution of the Contemporary Lesbian Community', and 'Making History Bigger': Grassroots Lesbian Community History Projects. Sessions on visual images and literature were also held, testifying to the continued interest in the cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary study of lesbian life and culture. The eclecticism, enthusiasm and anger (a leaflet briefly appeared attacking the organizers for failing to provide large enough rooms for the lesbian sessions) surely demonstrated an inspiring level of commitment.

But I want to raise a problem: most of the panels seemed more concerned with finding heroines than with uncovering the often fragmentary and contradictory evidence which must make up the lesbian past. Too often the current fashion in appropriate behavior was used to judge the past. Thus, in one session those who organized the Daughters of Bilitis and wrote for The Ladder in the 1950s were criticized for opposing butch/femme roles and for advocating assimilationist policies. At another session, after the alcoholism and violence of many of the working-class lesbian bars of the 1950s had been documented, this subculture was held up not only as the sole alternative for an 'out' lesbian, but also the best. At earlier history conferences, in contrast, I can remember praise lavished upon 19th-century romantic friendships as the ideal we should all strive to emulate. Now roles are in, romance is out; what will be next year's correct lesbian stance?

This modernist myopia, however satisfying for myth-makers, is ultimately condescending to the strengths and limitations of our
foremothers. Although there is much to be admired in the pioneering studies of the past decade, the time has come for a more sophisticated history. Rather than raiding the past to find satisfactory models for today, we should look to the difficulties, contradictions, and triumphs of women within the larger context of their own times.

In a survey of the past three hundred years, I would like to trace the many roots from which the modern lesbian identity has grown. The defining of a person's prime identity through his or her sexual object choice has been an erratic and incomplete process that we still do not completely understand, and indeed, may never. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring the historical conditions that have led to this modern definition of an individual's identity. However critical I may be of past research in lesbian history, this essay is in many ways a summation of recent work.

Even as I call for a shift in the questions asked about women's same-sex relations, I too focus upon what has been seen as the single most important issue for contemporary lesbians, namely, the question of sexual identity. In 1984 the Editors of Signs pointed out that 'such a focus on identity may in fact limit inquiry to those cultures in which lesbian identity and survival as lesbians are crucial matters of concern; it may hinder cross-cultural analysis, for example, because it provides inadequate vocabulary for discussion of relationships among Third-World women.... Discussion of lesbianism in these terms has relevance only where identity and sexuality are intertwined and where personal identity is itself a cultural value.' This bias in lesbian studies continues today, so that Third-World women's relationships remain stereotypically silent, mysterious and unknown. Perhaps as we gain a better understanding of the white, Euro-American past, so fully represented at the Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality? Conference, we will have the confidence and knowledge to move beyond our ethnocentrism. In turn, Third-World historians will bring new perspectives and new questions to bear upon the reconstruction of lesbian history.
PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

The single most frustrating problem facing every historian of lesbianism is the historical suppression of female sexuality. All societies that I know of have denied, controlled or muted the public expression of active female sexuality. How and why they have done so, of course, varies enormously, and therein lies our particular task. We must first decode female sexual desire, and then within it, find same-sex desire. By necessity we need to be sensitive to nuance, masks, secrecy, and the unspoken. If we look to the margins, to the ruptures and breaks, we will be able to piece together a history of women speaking to each other. A closer examination of single women running their own schools, or actresses drinking after hours in male drag, or private costume parties for the initiated may reveal surprising continuities.

To date lesbian historiography has concentrated on three areas of research: 1) the retrieval and reconstruction of both lesbian couples and lesbian communities, 2) the exploration of the two major paradigmatic forms of lesbian behavior, namely, romantic friendships and butch/femme roles, and 3) the question of when the modern lesbian identity arose, and under what circumstances. Since scholars have spent so much time excavating a lost past, few cross-cultural or cross-national comparisons have yet been made. We also know all too little about the legal position of lesbians in comparison with the far richer documentation of the oppression of gay men. In spite of the extensive debates about the influence of the late-19th-century sexologists, we do not yet have detailed studies of how their theories were popularized within and outside the medical profession. Periodization remains an important issue. We are still woefully ignorant about women's sexual behavior before the early modern period. The neglect of cross-class relationships seems inexplicable to me, except for the lack of obvious sources. If we knew more, would we find a similar idealization of the 'natural' working-class lover that characterizes so much 20th-century English gay male literature? Must we assume that women involved in romantic friendships were always and only middle class? Much still remains to be investigated.

One of the principal reasons why historians of lesbianism have
had so much difficulty in defining a lesbian identity in the past is because our history is rooted in two very different kinds of female desire, both of which involve a self-conscious decision. On the one hand, we have women who passed as men, and as 'female husbands' were said to use a dildo to trick their 'wives'. These women, when discovered, were found guilty of homosexual acts. On the other hand, women who entered into long-term romantic friendships were presumed to be in relationships that involved no sex acts. Out of necessity we have coined the rather unsatisfactory word 'homoerotic' to describe the latter relationships, while reserving 'passing' or 'cross-dressing' for women who appeared by all accounts to be men. This latter definition ignores the lover of the passing woman. The 20th-century solution has been to call her a 'femme', but this hardly solves the problem for a historian.  

The difficulty of negotiating these two different worlds is compounded by the fact that sometime in the middle of the 19th century a third type appeared, namely the cross-dressed masculine-appearing woman whose primary emotional and probably also sexual commitment was to women – the Rosa Bonheurs, about whom society wondered to which sex they belonged. At the same time, both romantic friendships and passing women continued well into the 20th century. In 1929, for example, in the midst of the Well of Loneliness obscenity trial, a Colonel Barker was arrested after over a decade of passing as a World War I hero; she had been married for three years before deserting her wife.  

Leila Rupp has documented the homoerotic relations of woman activists in the American Women's Party in the 1940s and 50s.  

Neither sexual relations nor a self-proclaimed identity can define the history of lesbianism.  

None of these three well-recognized types includes a possible fourth type, the intermittent lover of women. Like the masculine partner in a gay male relation, this woman lacked a visible identity, but may have been quite common.  

We probably have ignored this kind of woman because the little documentation we have about her is either gossip or pornography. She has sometimes been dismissed as either bisexual or as a dangerous dabbler. Alternatively, for those seeking evidence of lesbian activity in the past, she has been added to the list of heroines. George Sand dressed as a male student in order to sit in the cheap seats at the
theatre, and into her forties she wore informal male dress at home. She was also for a brief period madly in love with the actress Marie Dorval. Given her reputation as a sexually free woman, rumors swirled around Sand, inviting different interpretations of her identity then and now. Her position at the center of 19th-century French Bohemia, however, is a clue to where we should look for examples of the intermittent lover of women.

If we turn to the larger historical context within which a lesbian identity may have grown, all the usual criteria used by historians to explain social change do not seem sufficient. A lesbian identity did not result from economic independence, nor from an ideology of individualism, nor from the formation of women’s communities, although all these elements were important for enhancing women’s personal choices. In 1981 Ann Ferguson argued that financial independence was a necessary precondition for the formation of a lesbian identity, but this does not seem to be the case.\textsuperscript{12} We have examples from the 18th century to the present of professional and working-class women who earned their own living and lived apart from their families with women. Their lives were usually woman-centered, but this was often due more to the necessity of maintaining respectability than to overt sexual preference. Economic freedom created more choice for women, but not a new sexual identity.

The onset of the industrial revolution appears to have had little impact upon the formation of a lesbian culture, although it led to more occupational opportunities for women of all social classes. The development of a mercantile economy in 17th- and 18th-century northern Europe may have encouraged some women to think of themselves as individuals apart from their families. Both religion and politics united to emphasize the importance of the individual’s soul; those women who found strength through belief to seek non-traditional roles may also have felt – and acted upon – non-traditional sexual desires.

The formation of self-conscious women’s communities can be seen as a necessary precondition for a lesbian identity. But here again we find a tradition going back into the Middle Ages that yielded feminine and proto-feminist independence and bonding, but hardly anything one could recognize as a lesbian identity. During the 18th and 19th centuries women organized salons,
artistic coteries, religious organizations and educational institutions, but these were not exclusively lesbian groups. Thus at every turn we seem to be baffled for an explanation of the sources of a lesbian identity. No wonder so many scholars keep returning to the late-19th-century sexologists. Did they define us, or did we define ourselves?

This question, or rather, the broader one about the formation of a lesbian identity, has been difficult to answer because there is no agreement about what constitutes a lesbian. The general lack of court records, which have provided gay male historians with such rich archival material, has forced women to think in broader, and consequently, vaguer terms. Following Faderman’s pioneering work, *Surpassing the Love of Men. Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981), some scholars have found romantic friendships to be the most characteristic form of pre-20th-century same-sex love. Blanche Wiesen Cook and Adrienne Rich have pointed to the historical suppression of homosexuality, and argued for the essential unity of all woman-identified women. Cook’s definition, for example, has been influential in encouraging women to rethink the broader social and political context of their own lives and of women in the past: ‘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.”¹³ This general definition neglects both the element of sexual choice and the marginal status that was (and continues to be) so important in lesbian relationships. The woman who moved in and out of relationships and commitments to women is denied a place in this ‘living environment’. Moreover, the very different patterns of sexual behavior in the working class and aristocracy are neglected in favor of a middle class that closely resembles the present feminist movement.

Not surprisingly, these broad definitions of the lesbian have met with a strong response from those who have felt that scholars were in danger of draining sexuality from lesbian women’s lives. In an important special issue of *Heresies* (1981), several lesbians challenged the feminist vision of an egalitarian, ‘mutually orgasmic, struggle-free, trouble-free sex’. Amber Hollibaugh insisted, ‘I think by focusing on roles in lesbian relationships, we can begin
to unravel who we really are in bed. When you hide how profoundly roles can shape your sexuality, you can use that as an example of other things that get hidden. In the same issue, Joan Nestle proclaimed, 'Butch/fem was [in the 1950s] an erotic partnership, serving as a conspicuous flag of rebellion and as an intimate exploration of women's sexuality.' However valuable this position has been in the political debates of the present, it has sometimes served to limit the exploration of the past. Depending as it does upon self-definition and active sexuality, it can become insensitive to the very different lives of women in the past. How are we ever to know definitively what someone born a hundred or two hundred years ago did in bed? And as Cook had pointed out, does it really matter so much?

It may be easier if we avoid the psychological and sociological labels of 'identity' and 'self', and return instead to the language of the past. Our foremothers and forefathers appear to have had a very clear sense of what we would call lesbian desire, but they interpreted it rather differently from us. Their vocabulary, drawn from the classical world, emphasized homosexual acts rather than a lifelong identity. The Greek word 'tribade' appears only in the 16th and early 17th centuries in France and England. Even then, only educated men used it. Far more common was 'hermaphrodite', but it was applied to both men and women, and it too was largely used by the educated. Sapphic, the word used most frequently in memoirs, does not even merit a sexual definition in the Oxford English Dictionary. What is most striking, however, is the lack of popular slang, in comparison with male homosexuality, until the 20th century. Female soldiers and sailors, well known among the common people, appear to have been categorized simply as curiosities.

In the late 17th and 18th centuries, when the traditional hierarchies of social order, private and public, were giving way to ideas of individualism and egalitarianism, lesbian desire appears to have been defined in three dominant ways, closely linked to the social class of the women concerned. This correlation between class, public appearance and sexual behavior suggests an effort to categorize women's deviant sexual behavior in a satisfactory manner that did not threaten the dominant heterosexual and social paradigms of the age.
At the risk of oversimplification, the most familiar model was drawn from the folklore of the people, in which a woman cross-dressed as a man. Virtually all of the examples of passing women that have survived (and many women must have died with their true identity unknown) are of working-class and peasant women who sought more job opportunities, better pay and greater freedom. Contemporaries often reinterpreted this behavior to suit a more personal, even romantic, explanation. Many accounts of ‘female warriors’ or ‘sailors’ survive; 18th-century broadside ballads praised the brave woman who went into battle in order to find her beloved. Most versions excited the listener with the possibility of sexual transgression, but resolved matters in the final verse with a happy marriage or other appropriate female destiny. Alternatively, the cross-dressed woman was an eccentric and flamboyant character. Wandering actresses, or even less reputable vagrants, made up most of this group. The most famous example was Charlotte Charke, whose 1746 memoirs robustly declared on the title page, ‘Her Adventures in Mens Cloaths, going by the Name of Mr. Brown, and being belov’d by a Lady of great Fortune, who intended to marry her’. However, she cast her autobiography in terms of a theatrical comedy, so as to mitigate the dangerous implications of her actions.

Rudolph Dekker and Lotte van der Pol have argued that in Holland women who dressed as men did so because they could conceive of love for another woman only in terms of the existing heterosexual paradigm. If this was so, the highly risky marriages that so many cross-dressed women undertook make sense, for they were ‘the logical consequence of, on the one hand, the absence of a social role for lesbians and the existence of, on the other hand, a tradition of women in men’s clothing.’ I find this interpretation to be convincing, especially since we have corroborating evidence from the 19th century. Nevertheless, most of our examples of cross-dressed women include too little personal information to generalize with confidence about the many and complicated psychosocial reasons why a woman might cross-dress in the past. Their reasons, in most cases, appear to have been for the freedom and advantages male clothing insured.

The second category of publicly-identified lesbian desire is what I would label ‘porn and politics’, that is, the many attacks
on powerful women who could be seen as endangering the normal political hierarchies through their undue influence upon a ruler. It is here that we find much of our evidence for the intermittent lover of women. The connection between sexual deviance and political deviance is hardly unique to women; indeed, the libertine libertarian John Wilkes (1727-97) was the subject of an intense pamphlet war linking him with excessive freedoms of all sorts. The most famous example of this kind of political linkage is Marie Antoinette, who was repeatedly accused of political intrigue and bisexual debauchery. Although her female lovers were of her own social class, she was accused of taking on male lovers from the lower classes. The major difficulty in interpreting much of this material is that it was obviously generated by those with a particular political ax to grind. Moreover, it has close links with the long-standing tradition of male pornographic fantasies; indeed, in several cases Marie Antoinette was woven into pornographic plots with little consideration of historical facts. I believe that we should not dismiss this material, for such culturally influential male fantasies, derived from both pornography and high art, had a lasting impact upon the public image of the lesbian.

The third, and increasingly important, form that lesbian desire took was based upon, but subtly different from, the bourgeois family. This was, of course, the romantic friendship. Nancy Cott has documented the ways in which the definition of ‘friend’ changed in the 18th century to refer specifically to an elective, non-familial relationship of particular importance. By the second half of the 19th century, these ‘Boston marriages’, with their stronger erotic undertones, were obviously alternatives to, but strongly modeled upon, the heterosexual family. Most couples had one partner who was more active and public, while the other was more retiring. The 19th-century English educational reformers Constance Maynard and Louisa Lumsden, for example, spoke of each other as wife and husband respectively; as headmistress of the school, Lumsden expected her ‘wife’ to support her decisions and to comfort her when difficulties arose.

Maaike Meijer in her description of the friendship of two famous 18th-century Dutch bluestockings, Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken, points to the importance of a shared interest in learning,
often in the face of family and public opposition, as a crucial element in many romantic friendships. A sense of being different, of wanting more than other young women, symbolized by a love of learning, characterizes many of the romantic friendships described by Faderman in Surpassing the Love of Men. Yet even here, women’s friendships were tightly controlled by external definitions of respectability. All bourgeois families feared any emotions that would overturn the conventional hierarchies in the private and public spheres. It was hoped that the discipline of study might teach women friends to be rational, to control their love for each other. In actuality, it probably led to a desire for greater independence – and consequently, an increased labeling of such friendships as deviant.

These three types were united less by the behavior or attitudes of the women than by the ways in which men interpreted women’s same-sex desire. On the one hand, we have condescension, amusement and curiosity; on the other, we have horror, punishment and expulsion. In either response, however, women’s same-sex behavior remained marginal to the male sexual and societal discourses. Only when a woman seemed to contravene directly masculine priorities and privileges was she punished. But even in these cases, sexual deviancy had to be compounded by a trespassing upon the male preserves of religion or politics in order to draw the full wrath of masculine authority. Lesbian sexuality remained a muted discourse except in those isolated instances when men felt threatened directly by it.

The most usual punishment for a woman who ‘married’ another woman was a public whipping and banishment. One notable exception, however, was the early 18th-century case of ‘James How’. After suffering from years of blackmail, the respected innkeeper took her case to the magistrates; they did not arrest her for fraud, but imprisoned the blackmailer. All surviving accounts of How treat her sympathetically. The most acceptable model for understanding her thirty-five year ‘marriage’ was the female-warrior ballad, and reports were circulated that she and her ‘wife’ must have decided to join together after they had been jilted by men.

The aristocracy were assumed, of course, to be especially cavalier about sexual morals. Havelock Ellis mentions an 18th-cen-
tury Frenchman who told a friend in regard to his fiancée’s lesbian relationship, ‘I confess that that is a kind of rivalry which causes me no annoyance; on the contrary it amuses me, and I am immoral enough to laugh at it.” In contrast, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg had documented the closeness of middle-class friends in America, where husbands obligingly let them sleep together on the long visits characteristic of an age without good transportation.

This casual and seeming indifference to women’s relationships needs to be contrasted with those occasions when women clearly threatened the dominance of men or of the traditional family. Charlotte Charke, in spite of her notoriety, was never a public threat because she remained a liminal figure, but the multifarious sins of the German Catharina Margaretha Linck led to her hanging. She had joined an egalitarian, woman-led religion, and later had converted to Roman Catholicism and then Lutheranism. Cross-dressed as a man, she served in a Prussian volunteer corps, worked as a weaver, and married a woman. After hearing complaints from her daughter, Linck’s mother-in-law and a neighbor attacked her, took her sword, ripped open her pants, examined her, and discovered that she was indeed not a man but a woman. In her defense, Linck insisted she had been deluded by Satan, and that it was no sin for a maiden to wear men’s clothes.

As befits their class origins, romantic friendships were generally accepted without question. But I think that we may have exaggerated their overall acceptability. A fear of excess—whether of learning or of emotion—may well have been a cover for opposition to the erotic preference implied by such close friends. The dangerous usurping of marital privileges can be seen in a famous English divorce case. In 1864 Admiral Henry Codrington petitioned for divorce on the grounds of his wife’s adultery; in addition, the feminist Emily Faithfull (1835-95) was accused of alienating his wife’s affections. Helen Codrington, in turn, accused him of attempted rape upon Faithfull one night when the two women were sleeping together. Faithfull herself first signed an affidavit claiming that this incident had taken place, but in court she refused to confirm it. The scandal permanently damaged her standing with other feminists, and she never regained the position
of leadership she had held as the founder of the Victoria Press and The Victoria Magazine.

Women who avoided a direct confrontation with male prerogatives, whether sexual or political, fared best. The most famous example of romantic friendship in the 18th century was the upper-class 'Ladies of Llangollen', who ran away from threats of marriage and the convent to live with each other in remote North Wales.34 Eleanor Butler (1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831) succeeded because they each had a small income and made a determined effort to reproduce a happy marriage in rural retirement. (James How and his 'wife' had followed the working-class equivalent of this pattern in their moral probity, modesty and hard work.) Samuel Johnson's friend, the well-known gossip Mrs. Piozzi, throughout her life kept up a vigorous correspondence with the admired couple about the arts, literature and contemporary affairs.

Mrs. Piozzi, however, made a distinction that was typical of the age, in respecting the intellectual Ladies and loathing the sexual antics of the aristocracy. In 1789 she noted, 'The Queen of France is at the Head of a Set of Monsters call'd by each other Sapphists, who boast her example and deserve to be thrown with the He Demons that haunt each other likewise, into Mount Vesuvius. That Vice increases hourly in Extent - while expected Parricides frighten us no longer....' 35 The dislike of such behavior seems to have stemmed from the growing political hatred of the dissolute aristocracy as much as a distaste for their frolics. Nevertheless, the fear of active female sexuality in places of power was a potent threat, as Marie-Jo Bonnet reminds us. She argues that the Revolutionary crowd's decapitation and then mutilation of Mme. Lamballe's genitals was an effort to destroy lesbian friendships, and not just the friend of the imprisoned queen.36

EXPLORING IDENTITIES

By the early years of the 19th century we can see two changes in same-sex relations. First, male commentary on intermittent lesbian love-making, whether hearsay, journalism or literature, became much more common. Public gossip shifted from Marie Antoinette's bedroom politics to the overtly sexual women of
Bohemia. Now women who were not necessarily wealthy or well-connected could – at the price of respectability – choose to live a sexually free life. Second, a few middle-class working women began to wear masculine (or simply practical) clothing. They insisted upon their sexual respectability, but also asserted their right to enter many predominantly male arenas, such as medicine, literature, art and travel. The bohemians flaunted their sexuality, while the professional single woman strove for an asexual androgyny. George Sand (1804-76) is the most important representative of the former type, and Rosa Bonheur (1822-99) of the latter; not coincidentally, both were self-supporting artists.

The active, mannish woman from the middle classes can be found throughout Europe and America by the mid-century. One of the most famous was the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908), who led a group of expatriate women artists in Rome.37 Charlotte Cushman (1816-76), an American actress of the period, frequently acted in male roles and wore men’s clothes offstage. She and Hosmer, keen advocates of physical activity for women, took midnight horse rides, sat astride, and followed the hounds with the men.38 The highly esteemed Rosa Bonheur had been granted special permission to dress in trousers when she visited abattoirs and livestock auctions in order to study the anatomy of animals. She wore her trousers and smock, however, on all but formal occasions.

Bonheur worked hard to keep the image of respectable independence which characterized romantic friendships. Nevertheless, her masculine features and wearing of men’s clothes placed her in a suspect category. When French taste turned against her realistic paintings, she hinted to friends that the criticism was as much a personal attack on her life with Nathalie Micas as it was her artistry.39 However proud she may have been of her androgynous appearance, Bonheur was also self-conscious enough to insist that her lifelong relations with Micas and Anna Klumpke were pure, and she wrote to Magnus Hirschfeld describing herself as a member of the ‘third sex’.40

Bonheur’s insistence upon her androgyny contrasts sharply with the behavior of the earlier George Sand. Bonheur appears to have separated her body from her clothes, or rather her masculine clothes represented her soul, and not her body. Sand, as
Isabelle de Courtivon has pointed out, fit into male fantasies of the devouring lesbian, of the woman who is all body. When this remarkable woman cross-dressed, it represented not her soul but her all-too-dominating body. Sand symbolized the strong woman who devoured weak men, and found her pleasure in the arms of other women. The 1830s in France spawned novels about monsters, of whom lesbians were among the most titillating. This male-generated image of sexual deviance proved to be especially powerful, and one that would return repeatedly in 20th-century portrayals of the lesbian femme damnée.  

During the first half of the 19th century we can see the accelerating efforts of the medical and legal professions to define, codify and control all forms of sexuality, and thereby to replace the church as the arbiters of sin and morality. Women’s deviant sexual behaviors, whether heterosexual prostitution or homosexual sex, continued to be male-defined transgressions dominated by male language, theories and traditions. The pioneering French medical hygienist, A.J.B. Parent-Duchâtelet, linked the lives of prostitutes with those of cross-dressed lesbians. Both represented possibilities and fears for men, for each embodied an active, independent, uncontrollable sexuality. Underneath their veneer of scientific language, the medical and legal tracts betray many of the same interests and biases as pornography and literature.  

It has become a truism that the sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, did not so much define a lesbian identity as describe and categorize what they saw about them. Ellis drew his small sample of six lesbians from his bisexual wife and her friends; all his other examples are either historical or literary, many of them from the French writers who had been so shocked by George Sand’s flamboyance. Like Krafft-Ebing, he identified lesbians by their so-called masculine behavior, such as smoking, speaking loudly and wearing comfortable clothes. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has pointed out that “Krafft-Ebing’s lesbians seemed to desire male privileges and power as ardently as, perhaps more ardently than, they sexually desired women.” However revolutionary these men may have thought their descriptions to be, both were simply confirming the long-standing representation of women’s social transgression as both the symp-
tom and the cause of their sexual transgression. What had changed, however, was the new biologism that insisted upon the primacy of the body as the definer of public, social behavior. The long-familiar descriptions of deviant sexual activity were now labeled innate characteristics, rather than immoral choices.

Several feminist historians in Britain, following the lead of Lillian Faderman, have argued that the sexologists created a climate of opinion that stigmatized single women and their relationships and favored heterosexuality. Others have argued that the sexologists stimulated the formation of a lesbian identity or that their influence has been greatly exaggerated. All of these scholars have, to date, looked almost exclusively at the medical debates, rather than placing these debates in a wider historical context. A host of competing sociobiological ideologies and disciplines flourished at the end of the 19th century, including Social Darwinism, eugenics, criminology and anthropology; women's sexual relations could hardly remain unaffected by them.

Have we too readily categorized these early sexologists and their embarrassingly crude classifications of sexual behavior? Rather than labeling the sexologists' descriptions benighted misogyny, we might learn more from them about both contemporary lesbian mores and masculine attitudes. Esther Newton has suggested that Havelock Ellis's biological determinism at the very least made available a sexual discourse to middle-class women, who 'had no developed female sexual discourse; there were only male discourses - pornographic, literary, and medical - about female sexuality'. I would also add that these three male discourses had long affected the traditional categories of passing women, romantic friendships, intermittent lesbian sexuality and androgynous women; all four types had already been defined as suspect before they were taken up by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. In effect, women's sexual behavior has never been isolated from or independent of the dominant male discourses of an age.

By the end of the 19th century, Paris was known for its lesbian subculture, thanks not only to Sand's reputation, but also to the poetry and fiction of such notable male writers as Balzac, Gautier, Baudelaire, Pierre Louys, Zola, Maupassant and Daudet. Wealthy and/or intrepid women consciously migrated not only to Paris, but also to Berlin, Amsterdam, New York, San Fran-
cisco, Chicago and other cities, where they hoped to find others sympathetic to their sexual preference. They were specifically attracted to cities with a reputation for bohemian freedom, which promised to give women space to explore their sexuality.

The self-conscious leaders of these 20th-century communities embraced all aspects of the mixed heritage of same-sex relations. Perhaps wealth (or an expatriate status) gave them the confidence to forge a new female-defined identity. The passing woman was embodied in the cross-dressed Marquise de Belbeuf, Colette’s lover, or in Radclyffe Hall, author of The Well of Loneliness (1928). The enthusiasm for learning, languages and the arts, so characteristic of earlier generations of romantic friends, continued. Renée Vivien (1877-1909) and Natalie Barney took Greek lessons in order to read Sappho in the original; both made numerous trips to Greece, and participated in Greek theatricals. The Sapphic parties of Marie Antoinette were revived in Barney’s famous entertainments. The militant respectability of Rosa Bonheur was transformed into the militant demand for recognition, best embodied in Hall’s decision to write a book defending the ‘true invert’. The bohemian world of George Sand did not need to be recreated because these women were living their own version of it.51

The most striking aspect of the lesbian coteries of the 1910s and 20s was their self-conscious effort to create a new sexual language for themselves that included not only words, but also gestures, costume and behavior. The parties, plays and masquerades of the wealthy American Natalie Barney (1876-1970) are the best known ‘creations’. They are commemorated in Djuna Barnes’s privately published mock-heroic epic, The Ladies’ Almanack (1928), in which Barney appears as Evangeline Musset. Although a ‘witty and learned Fifty’, she was ‘so much in Demand, and so wide famed for her Genius at bringing up by Hand, and so noted and esteemed for her Slips of the Tongue that it finally brought her in the Hall of Fame....’52 Barney herself said, ‘Men have skins, but women have flesh – flesh that takes and gives light.’53

It is this insistence upon the flesh, the very body of the lesbian, that distinguishes this generation. But if Barney celebrated the tactile delights of a woman’s body, for Radclyffe Hall the lesbian
body could be a curse because society refused to acknowledge its inherent validity. Without public, and especially family, acceptance, self-hatred was inevitable for her heroine Stephen in The Well of Loneliness: "...she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body." Moreover, contemporaries had the example of Renée Vivien to remind them of the psychic dangers of lesbian love. Vivien embodied the doomed lesbian by changing her name, her religion and her body, finally drinking and starving herself to death by the age of 31.

On the one hand, we have Barney's declaration that a woman's body was her greatest pleasure, and on the other, Hall's contention that a woman's body was her unavoidable destiny, sterile or fertile. Both positions have an altogether too familiar ring, for both had long been encoded in male discourse. This generation of extraordinary women could not escape a familiar paradox that feminists still confront: by privileging the body, positively or negatively, women necessarily become participants in an already-defined language and debate. Woman as body had been a male trope for too long to be overcome by a spirited or tragic rejection.

Newton has argued that Radclyffe Hall chose to portray Stephen as a congenital invert, based upon Havelock Ellis's theories, because it was her only alternative to the asexuality of romantic friendships. Actually, by the late 1920s she had numerous other alternatives, including Natalie Barney's hedonistic lesbianism, Vivien's self-created tragedy, Colette's theatrical affair with the Marquise, and the many less colorful monogamous couples in Paris's literary world. For her, these women were either too closeted or too ostentatious, and therefore too close to heterosexual fantasies about the life of the deviant. Hall's militant demand that lesbians be granted respect for who they were, and not who they might associate with or how they might live, made Ellis's congenital invert the most natural choice. Ironically, as soon as a woman's body - specifically Stephen's 'monstrous' body - became the focus of discussion, it was outlawed socially and legally. A book that proclaimed a woman's free
sexual choice as overtly as *The Well* was as dangerous as Catharina Margaretha Linck's dildo.

The demand for respect, for acceptance of one's innate difference, assumed a kind of sexual parity with men which women have never had. Hall's radical message was lost, but her portrait of Stephen remained. The complex heritage of the first generation of self-identified lesbians seemed at first to come together to create a New Woman, but then collapsed into the single figure of the deprived and depraved *femme damnée*. The open-ended confidence and playfulness of the 1910s and 20s did not survive the court case against *The Well of Loneliness*. The politically and economically turbulent 1930s narrowed women's sexual options. The lesbian community in Paris certainly continued, but shorn of its former glamor. Those who could find work often had to support their relatives. The women's movement itself seemed increasingly irrelevant in the face of such competing ideologies as Communism and Fascism. Unfortunately generalizations are difficult to make, for we know little about the isolated lesbian of the 1930s. Our only evidence is fleeting references in popular psychology books, labeling her - like Krafft-Ebing - as dangerously independent.

The doomed lesbian was a remarkably durable image. By the 1950s everyone knew what a lesbian was; she had been assigned a clearly defined role. Defiance and loneliness marked her life, according to the pulp romances. The English Elizabeth Wilson has described how attractive this model was for her in the 1950s, providing as it did an alternative to bourgeois marriage. But once again, the femme had disappeared. Although the American Joan Nestle has argued forcefully for her importance, Wilson experienced being a woman's woman as 'the lowest of the low' in the liberal heterosexual world she inhabited. Both the general public and lesbians themselves privileged the figure of the mannish lesbian because she most nearly approximated their expectations of what a lesbian should be. Romantic feeling, forbidden desires and social marginality were all represented by her cross-dressing. But, as I have demonstrated, she was also the product of a tangled history which embodied the outlawry of passing, the idealism of romantic friendship and the theatricality of aristocratic play. What has adhered to her identity most
powerfully, however, is the sense of being born different, of having a body that reflects a specific sexual identity.

But even as the tragic lesbian stalked the imagination of the 1950s and early 60s, the old playfulness of an earlier generation never completely died. Now it has returned not to recreate the past, but either to celebrate the identification of homosexuality with defined, and inescapable, roles or to imagine a utopian world of transformed women. Like the women of the early 20th century, many lesbians of our time have set themselves the task of creating a lesbian language, of defining lesbian desire, and of imagining a lesbian society. Monique Wittig, in Les Guérillères (1969), Le Corps lesbien (1973) and Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes (1975), has presented the most sustained alternative language and worlds. Her wholesale rewriting of history, in which all mention of man is eliminated, makes it possible to imagine a woman's body outside male discourse. Even here, however, our history is incomplete. In their heroic comedy Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes, Wittig and her co-author Sande Zeig, leave a blank page for the reader to fill in under Sappho. Dyke, butch, amazon, witch, and such 'obsolete' words as woman and wife are included. But androgyne, femme, invert and friendship are missing. Rosa Bonheur, who so disliked rigid sex roles, is strangely absent from this world. And what about the intermittent lover of women? Historians are more confined to the evidence before them than writers of fiction, and cannot create utopias, but they can and do create myths. When we rewrite, indeed, recreate, our lost past, do we too readily drop those parts of our past that seem unattractive to us? Can (and should) utopian language and ideas help us recuperate a history full of contradictions?

NOTES

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10 Some of the issues raised here are also discussed by Lisa Duggan in ‘Eleanor Roosevelt – Was She or Wasn’t She? The Problem of Definition in Lesbian History’. In *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality? Conference Papers*, *op. cit.*, History, Vol. 1, pp. 5-17.

11 For a discussion of this among gay men, see Randolph Trumbach, ‘Gender and the Homosexual Role in Modern Western Culture: The 18th and 19th Centuries Compared,’ elsewhere in this volume.


17 The Oxford English Dictionary, not always the most reliable source on sexual matters, records the first use of *tribade*
in 1601; tribady in 1811-19, in reference to the famous Miss Woods and Miss Pirie vs Lady Cuming Gordon. Hermaphrodite receives the most complete coverage, with the first reference to its use as 1398. Sapphic is defined simply as 'Of or pertaining to Sappho, the famous poetess of Lesbos', or 'A meter used by Sappho or named after her'. Sapphism is not mentioned. Marie-Jo Bonnet traces a similar linguistic development in French, beginning with the 16th-century use of tribade, in Un choix sans équivoque (Paris: Denoel, 1981) pp. 25-67. She gives three examples from the Dictionnaire érotique latin-français, a 17th-century erotic dictionary (published only in the 19th century) which mentions tribade, lesbien, and fricatrix (someone who rubs/caresses another person 'for pleasure or for health'). See p. 43.

Obviously the earliest usages of slang are difficult to establish, but Eric Partridge's A Dictionary of the Underworld: British and American (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949; 1961) dates the first use of bull-dike as ca. 1920 and dike [sic] as 1935; lezo ca. 1930; lesb, lesbie, lesbo, as 20th-century, 'by 1940 at latest'. Sapphist and bull-dagger are not mentioned.

The one obvious exception to this generalization is Dr. James Barry (1795-1865), a well-known British army surgeon, whom contemporaries assumed was a hermaphrodite on account of his small stature, lack of beard, and high voice. Julie Wheelwright, who is completing a book on women who passed as soldiers and sailors, feels that Dr. Barry may not have been a woman. The only definite evidence we have is the claim made by the woman who laid her out. But see Isobel Rae, The Strange Story of Dr. James Barry. London: Longman, 1958.

The most complete discussion to date of these ballads is Dianne Dugaw, 'Balladry's Female Warriors: Women, Warfare, and Disguise in the Eighteenth Century'. Eighteenth-Century Life 9:2 (January 1985) pp. 1-20.


Rudolph Dekker and Lotte van der Pol, 'Cross-Dressing as


28 These issues are touched on, but not completely developed, in Martha Vicinus, 'Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships'. *Signs* 9:4 (Summer 1984) pp. 618-22.


31 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, ‘The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America'. In her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Vic-

32 Erickson, op.cit., p. 33.


36 Bonnet, op.cit., p. 165.


42 In addition to De Courtivon, see also Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men, op.cit., pp. 274-99; and

Dorelies Kraakman, 'Sexual Ambivalence of Women Artists in Early Nineteenth-Century France'. In Homosexu- ality, Which Homosexuality? Conference Papers, op.cit., History, Vol. 1, pp. 169-80. I am indebted to Dorelies Kraakman for discussing with me the importance of the 1830s and 40s in France for understanding the formation of a new public discourse about women's sexuality.

43 He claimed: 'Lesbians have fallen to the last degree of vice.
to which a human creature can attain, and, for that very reason, they require a most particular surveillance on the part of those charged with the surveillance of prostitutes...'


45 See: Lal Coveney et al., *The Sexuality Papers: Male Sexuality and the Sexual Control of Women*. London: Hutchinson, 1984; and


47 See Chauncey, *op. cit.*; and Vinicus, ‘Distance and Desire’, *op. cit.*


49 Gayle Rubin has coined the phrase ‘sexual migrations’ to describe the movement of people to cities undertaken to explore specialized sexualities not available in the traditional family arrangement, and often smaller towns, where they grew up.’ (Quoted by Rayna Rapp in ‘An Introduction to Elsa Gitlow: Memoirs’. *Feminist Studies* 6:1 (Spring 1980) p. 106.)

50 The literary relations in the most famous lesbian subculture have been explored by Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. See also the numerous biographies of the most famous figures. Benstock follows the lead of Elyse Blankley in characterizing Paris as ‘a double-edged sword, offering both free sexual expression and oppressive sexual stereotyping. It
might cultivate lesbianism like an exotic vine, but it would never nourish it. In front of [Renée] Vivien - and indeed, every lesbian - yawned the immense, unbridgeable chasm separating men's perceptions of lesbian women and lesbian women's perceptions of themselves.' (Quoted in Benstock, p. 49.) See Elyse Blankley, 'Return to Mytilene: Renée Vivien and the City of Women'. In Susan Merrill Squier (ed.), *Women Writers and the City*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984, pp. 45-67.

51 We have very little evidence of a working-class lesbian subculture at this time. Elsa Gidlow's memoirs seem to indicate a similar pattern of seeking out a bohemian artistic culture. During World War I she started a literary group in Montreal which attracted a young gay man who introduced her to the Decadent writers of the late 19th-century, avant-garde music and modern art. See Elsa Gidlow, 'Memoirs'. *Feminist Studies* 6:1 (Spring 1980) pp. 107-27.

52 In her essay 'The New Woman as Androgyne' (op.cit.) Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discusses the revolutionary nature of this project - and its failure, which she attributes to the writers' unsuccessful effort to transform the male discourse on female sexuality. See pp. 265-66, 285-96.


56 The feminist literature on this equation is vast, but see most recently Susan R. Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

57 This point is also made by Gillian Whitlock, "'Everything is Out of Place': Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Literary Tradition'. *Feminist Studies* 13:3 (Fall 1987) p. 576. See also Benstock's comment about this generation of lesbian writers as a whole: 'Without historical models, [their] writing was forced to take upon itself the double burden of creating a
model of lesbian behavior while recording the personal experience of that behavior.’ Benstock, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

