WHAT HAS NEVER BEEN: AN OVERVIEW OF LESBIAN FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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In the 1970s, a generation of lesbian feminist literary critics came of age. Some, like the lesbian professor in Lynn Strongin's poem, "Sayre," had been closeted in the profession; many had "come out" as lesbians in the women's liberation movement. As academics and as lesbians, we cautiously began to plait together the strands of our existence: teaching lesbian literature, establishing networks and support groups, and exploring assumptions about a lesbian-focused literary criticism. Beginning with nothing, as we thought, this generation quickly began to expand the limitations of literary scholarship by pointing to what had been for decades "unspeakable"—lesbian existence—thus phrasing, in novelist June Arnold's words, "what has never been." Our process has paralleled the development of feminist literary criticism—and, indeed, pioneering feminist critics and lesbian critics are often one and the same. As women in a male-dominated academy, we explored the way we write and read from a different or "other" perspective. As lesbians in a heterosexist academy, we have continued to explore the impact of "otherness," suggesting dimensions previously ignored and yet necessary to understand fully the female condition and the creative work born from it.

Lesbian critics, in the 1980s, may have more questions than answers, but the questions are important not only to lesbians, but to all feminists teaching and criticizing literature. Does a woman's sexual and affectional preference influence the way she writes, reads, and thinks? Does lesbianism belong in the classroom and in scholarship? Is there a lesbian aesthetic distinct from a feminist aesthetic? What should be the role of the lesbian critic? Can we establish a lesbian "canon" in the way in which feminist critics have established a female canon? Can lesbian feminists develop insights into female creativity that might enrich all literary criticism? Different women, of course, answer these questions in


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men—or not at all.

Lesbians have also expressed concern that the absence of lesbian material in women’s studies journals such as Feminist Studies, Women’s Studies, and Women and Literature indicates heterosexism either by omission or by design. Only in 1979 did lesbian-focused articles appear in Signs and Frontiers. Most lesbian criticism first appeared in alternative, non-establishment lesbian journals, particularly Sinister Wisdom and Conditions, which are unfamiliar to many feminist scholars. For example, Signs’ first review article on literary criticism by Elaine Showalter (1975) makes no mention of lesbianism as a theme or potential critical perspective, not even to point out its absence. Annette Kolodny, in the second review article in Signs (1976), does call Jane Rule’s Lesbian Images “a novelist’s challenge to the academy and its accompanying critical community,” and further criticizes the homophobia in then-current biographies, calling for “candor and sensitivity” in future work. However, neither this nor subsequent review articles familiarize the reader with “underground” sources of lesbian criticism, some of which had appeared by this time, nor do they explicate lesbianism as a literary theme or critical perspective. Ironically, more articles on lesbian literature have appeared in traditional literary journals than in the women’s studies press, just as for years only male critics felt free to mention lesbianism. Possibly, feminist critics continue to feel that they will be identified as “dykes,” thus invalidating their work.

The perceptual screen of heterosexism is also evident in most of the acclaimed works of feminist literary criticism. None of the current collections of essays—such as The Authority of Experience or Shakespeare’s Sisters—includes even a token article from a lesbian perspective. Ellen Moers’ Literary Women, germinal work as it is, is homophobic as well as heterosexist. Lesbians, she points out, appear as monsters, grotesques, and freaks in works by Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes (her reading of Nightwood is at the very least questionable), and Diane Arbus, but she seems to concur in this identification rather than call it into question or explain its historical context. Although her so-called defense of unmarried women writers against the “charge” of lesbianism does criticize the way in which this word has been used as a slur, she neither condemns such antilebianism nor entertains the possibility that some women writers were, in fact, lesbians. Her chapter on “Loving Heroinism” is virtually textbook heterosexism, assuming as it does that women writers only articulate love for men. Perceptual blinders also mar The Female Imagination by Patricia Meyers Spacks which never uses the word “lesbian” (except in the index) or “lover” to describe either the “sexual ambiguity” of the bond
different ways, but one set of assumptions underlies virtually all
lesbian criticism: that a woman’s identity is not defined only by
her relation to a male world and male literary tradition (as fem-
inist critics have demonstrated), that powerful bonds between
women are a crucial factor in women’s lives, and that the sexual
and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her
consciousness and thus her creativity. Those critics who have
consciously chosen to read as lesbians argue that this perspective
can be uniquely liberating and can provide new insights into life
and literature because it assigns the lesbian a specific vantage
point from which to criticize and analyze the politics, language,
and culture of patriarchy:

We have the whole range of women’s experience and the other dimension
too, which is the unique viewpoint of the dyke. This extra dimension
puts us a step outside of so-called normal life and lets us see how
gruely abnormal it is . . . [This perspective] can issue in a world-
view that is distinct in history and uniquely liberating.3

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the current state of lesbian
scholarship, to suggest how lesbians are exercising this unique
world view, and to investigate some of the problems, strengths,
and future needs of a developing lesbian feminist literary criti-
cism.4

One way in which this unique world view takes shape is as a
“critical consciousness about heterosexist assumptions.”5 Hetero-
sexism is the set of values and structures that assumes heterosexu-
ality to be the only natural form of sexual and emotional ex-
pression, “the perceptual screen provided by our [patriarchal]
cultural conditioning.”6 Heterosexist assumptions abound in literary
texts, such as feminist literary anthologies, that purport to be
open-minded about lesbianism. When authors’ biographies make
special note of husbands, male mentors, and male companions,
even when that author was primarily female-identified, but fail
to mention the female companions of prominent lesbian writers—
that is heterosexism. When anthologists ignore historically
significant lesbian writers such as Renée Vivien and Radclyffe
Hall—that is heterosexism. When anthologies include only the
heterosexual or nonsexual works of a writer like Katherine Philips
or Adrienne Rich who is celebrated for her lesbian or homo-
emotional poetry—that is heterosexism. When a topically
organized anthology includes sections on wives, mothers, sex
objects, young girls, aging women, and liberated women, but not
lesbians—that is heterosexism. Heterosexism in feminist antholo-
gies—like the sexism of androcentric collections—serves to
oblitrate lesbian existence and maintain the lie that women have
searched for emotional and sexual fulfillment only through
writing. In 1976, its editor, Beth Hodges, produced a second special issue, this time in Sinister Wisdom. Along with the growing visibility and solidarity of lesbians within the academic profession, and the increased availability of lesbian literature from feminist and mass-market presses, these two journal issues propelled lesbian feminist literary criticism to the surface.

The literary resources available to lesbian critics form only part of the story, for lesbian criticism is equally rooted in political ideology. Although not all lesbian critics are activists, most have been strongly influenced by the politics of lesbian feminism. These politics travel the continuum from civil rights advocacy to separatism; however, most, if not all, lesbian feminists assume that lesbianism is a healthy lifestyle chosen by women in virtually all eras and all cultures, and thus strive to eliminate the stigma historically attached to lesbianism. One way to remove this stigma is to associate lesbianism with positive and desirable attributes, to divert women's attention away from male values and toward an exclusively female communitas. Thus, the influential Radicalesbians' essay, "The Woman-Identified Woman," argues that lesbian feminism assumes "the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other.... We see ourselves as prime, find our centers inside of ourselves." Many lesbian writers and critics have also been influenced profoundly by the politics of separatism which provides a critique of heterosexuality as a political institution rather than a personal choice, "because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance." As we shall see, the notion of "woman-identification," that is, the primacy of women bonding with women emotionally and politically, as well as the premises of separatism, that lesbians have a unique and critical place at the margins of patriarchal society, are central to much current lesbian literary criticism.

Unmasking heterosexist assumptions in feminist literary criticism has been an important but hardly primary task for lesbian critics. We are more concerned with the development of a unique lesbian feminist perspective or, at the very least, determining whether or not such a perspective is possible. In order to do so, lesbian critics have had to begin with a special question: "When is a text a 'lesbian text' or its writer a 'lesbian writer'"? Lesbians are faced with this special problem of definition: presumably we know when a writer is a "Victorian writer" or a "Canadian writer." To answer this question, we have to determine how inclusively or exclusively we define "lesbian." Should we limit

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between Jane and Helen in *Jane Eyre*, nor Margaret Anderson's relationship with a "beloved older woman." Furthermore, Spacks claims that Gertrude Stein, "whose life lack[ed] real attachments" (a surprise to Alice B. Toklas), also "denied whatever is special to women" (which lesbianism is not?). This latter judgment is particularly ominous because heterosexuals often have difficulty accepting that a lesbian, especially a role-playing "butch," is in fact a woman. More care is demonstrated by Elaine Showalter who, in *A Literature of Their Own*, uncovers the attitudes toward lesbianism held by nineteenth-century writers Eliza Lynn Linton and Mrs. Humphrey Ward. However, she does not integrate lesbian issues into her discussion of the crucial generation of early twentieth-century writers (Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Dorothy Richardson, and Radclyffe Hall is mentioned, but not *The Well of Loneliness*), all of whom wrote about sexual love between women. Her well-taken point that modern British novelists avoid lesbianism might have been balanced, however, by a mention of Maureen Duffy, Sybille Bedford, or Fay Weldon. Finally, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* does not even index lesbianism; the lone reference made in the text is to the possibility that "Goblin Market" describes "a covertly (if ambiguously) lesbian world." The authors' tendency to interpret all pairs of female characters as aspects of the self sometimes serves to mask a relationship that a lesbian reader might interpret as bonding or love between women.

Lesbian critics, who as feminists owe much to these critical texts, have had to turn to other resources, first to develop a lesbian canon, and then to establish a lesbian critical perspective. Barbara Grier who, as Gene Damon, reviewed books for the pioneering lesbian journal *The Ladder*, laid the groundwork for this canon with her incomparable, but largely unknown *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography*. Equally obscure was Jeanette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, self-published in 1956 after having been rejected by a university press because of its subject matter. An exhaustive chronological account of every reference to love between women from Sappho and Ruth to the fiction of the fifties, *Sex Variant Women* has proven to be an invaluable starting point for lesbian readers and scholars. Out of print almost immediately after its publication and lost to all but a few intrepid souls, it was finally reprinted by Diana Press in 1975. A further resource and gathering point for lesbian critics was the special issue on lesbian writing and publishing in *Margins*, a review of small press publications, which appeared in 1975, the first issue of a literary journal devoted entirely to lesbian
women or with political commitment to women. These identifications can be fuzzy and historically questionable, as, for example, in the claim that lesbians have a unique relationship with nature or (as Rich also has claimed) that all female creativity is lesbian. By so reducing the meaning of lesbian, we have in effect eliminated lesbianism as a meaningful category.

A similar problem arises when lesbian theorists redefine lesbianism politically, equating it with strength, independence, and resistance to patriarchy. This new political definition then influences the interpretation of literature: "If in a woman writer’s work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature." The concept of an "innately" lesbian perspective or aesthetic allows the critic to separate lesbianism from biographical content which is an essential development in lesbian critical theory. Literary interpretation will, of course, be supported by historical and biographical evidence, but perhaps lesbian critics should borrow a few insights from new criticism. If a text lends itself to a lesbian reading, then no amount of biographic "proof" ought to be necessary to establish it as a lesbian text. Barbara Smith, for example, interprets Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as a lesbian novel, regardless of the author’s affectional preference. But we need to be cautious about what we call “innately” lesbian. Why is circularity or strength limited to lesbians, or, similarly, why is love of nature or creativity? It is certainly not evident that women, let alone lesbians, are “innately” anything. And, although it might require a lesbian perspective to stress the dominant relationship between Nel and Sula (“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude”), it is difficult to imagine a novel so imbued with heterosexuality as lesbian.

Almost midway between the inclusive and exclusive approaches to a definition of lesbianism lies that of Lillian Faderman in her extraordinary overview, *Surpassing the Love of Man: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present*. Faderman’s precise definition of lesbianism provides a conceptual framework for the four hundred years of literary history explored by the text:

“Lesbian” describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other.
this appellation to those women for whom sexual experience with other women can be proven? This is an almost impossible historical task, as many have noted, for what constitutes proof? Women have not left obvious markers in their private writings. Furthermore, such a narrow definition "names" lesbianism as an exclusively sexual phenomenon which, many argue, may be an inadequate construction of lesbian experience, both today and in less sexually explicit eras. This sexual definition of lesbianism also leads to the identification of literature with life, and thus can be an overly defensive and suspect strategy.

Nevertheless, lesbian criticism continues to be plagued with the problem of definition. One perspective insists that desire must be there and at least somewhat embodied . . . . That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy for homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle their sense of identity and well-being.\(^19\)

A second perspective, which might be called a school, claims, on the contrary, that "the very meaning of lesbianism is being expanded in literature, just as it is being redefined through politics."\(^20\) An articulate spokeswoman for this "expanded meaning" school of criticism is Adrienne Rich who offers a compelling inclusive definition of lesbianism:

I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of ‘lesbianism.’\(^21\)

This definition has the virtue of deemphasizing lesbianism as a static entity and of suggesting interconnections among the various ways in which women bond together. However, all inclusive definitions of lesbianism risk blurring the distinctions between lesbian relationships and non-lesbian female friendships, or between lesbian identity and female-centered identity. Some lesbian writers would deny that there are such distinctions, but this position is reductive and of mixed value to those who are developing lesbian criticism and theory and who may need limited and precise definitions. In fact, reductionism is a serious problem in lesbian ideology. Too often, we identify lesbian and woman, or feminist; we equate lesbianism with any close bonds between
been always a declared lesbian, but a victim of readers' (and scholars') unwillingness or inability to pay her the close and sympathetic attention she requires.29

The silence of ‘Shakespeare’s [lesbian] sister’ has meant that modern writers have had little or no tradition with which to nurture themselves. Feminist critics such as Moers, Showalter, and Gilbert and Gubar have demonstrated the extent and significance of a female literary tradition, but the lesbian writer developed her craft alone (and perhaps this is the significance of the title of the lesbian novel about novel writing, The Well of Loneliness). Elly Bulkin’s much-reprinted article on lesbian poetry points out that lesbian poets ‘have their work shaped by the simple fact of their having begun to write without knowledge of such history and with little or no hope of support from a woman’s and/or lesbian writing community.’30 If white women can at least imagine a lesbian literature, the black lesbian writer, as Barbara Smith demonstrates, is even more hampered by the lack of tradition: ‘Black women are still in the position of having to ‘imagine,’ discover and verify Black lesbian literature because so little has been written from an avowedly lesbian perspective.’31 Blanche Wiesen Cook points out further that all lesbians are affected by this absence of tradition and role models, or the limiting of role models to Hall’s Stephen Gordon. She also reminds us that our lesbian foremothers and networks were not simply lost and forgotten; rather, our past has been ‘erased,’ obliterated by the actions of a hostile society.32

It would appear then that lesbian critics are faced with a set of problems that make our work particularly delicate and problematic, requiring caution, sensitivity, and flexibility as well as imagination and risk. Lesbian criticism begins with the establishment of the lesbian text: the creation of language out of silence. The critic must first define the term ‘lesbian’ and then determine its applicability to both writer and text, sorting out the relation of literature to life. Her definition of lesbianism will influence the texts she identifies as lesbian, and, except for the growing body of literature written from an explicit lesbian perspective since the development of a lesbian political movement, it is likely that many will disagree with various identifications of lesbian texts. It is not only Sula that may provoke controversy, but even the ‘coded’ works of lesbian writers like Gertrude Stein. The critic will need to consider whether a lesbian text is one written by a lesbian (and if so, how do we determine who is a lesbian?), one written about lesbians (which might be by a heterosexual woman or a man), or one that expresses a lesbian ‘vision’ (which has yet to be satisfactorily outlined). But despite the problems
Broader than the exclusive definition of lesbianism—for Faderman argues that not all lesbian relationships may be fully embodied—but narrower than Rich's "lesbian continuum," this definition is both specific and discriminating. The book is slightly marred by a defensive, overexplanatory tone, caused, no doubt, by her attempt to neutralize the "intense charge of the word lesbian"; note, for example, that this charged word is omitted from the title. Furthermore, certain problems remain with her framework, as with any that a lesbian critic or historian might establish. The historical relationship between genital sexuality and lesbianism remains unclear, and we cannot identify easily lesbianism outside a monogamous relationship. Nevertheless, despite the strength of *Surpassing the Love of Men* is partially the precision with which Faderman defines her topic and chooses her texts and subjects.

This problem of definition is exacerbated by the problem of silence. One of the most pervasive themes in lesbian criticism is that woman-identified writers, silenced by a homophobic and misogynistic society, have been forced to adopt coded and obscure language and internal censorship. Emily Dickinson counseled us to "tell all the truth but tell it slant," and critics are now calculating what price we have paid for slanted truth. The silences of heterosexual women writers may become lies for lesbian writers, as Rich warns: "a life 'in the closet'...[may] spread into private life, so that lying (described as discretion) becomes an easy way to avoid conflict or complication." Gloria T. Hull recounts the moving story of just such a victim of society, the black lesbian poet Angelina Weld Grimké, whose "convoluted life and thwarted sexuality" marked her slim output of poetry with images of self-abnegation, diminution, sadness, and the wish for death. The lesbian writer who is working class or a woman of color may be particularly isolated, shackled by conventions and, ultimately, silenced "with [her] real gifts stifled within." What does a lesbian writer do when the words cannot be silenced? Critics are pointing to the codes and strategies for literary survival adopted by many women. For example, Willa Cather may have adopted her characteristic male persona in order to express safely her emotional and erotic feelings for other women. Thus, a writer some critics call antifeminist or at least disappointing may be better appreciated when her lesbianism is taken into account. Similarly, many ask whether Gertrude Stein cultivated obscurity, encoding her lesbianism in order to express hidden feelings and evade potential enemies. Or, on the other hand, Stein may have
Although she does not always clarify the dialectic between idealization and condemnation that is suggested in her text, Faderman’s basic theory is quite convincing. Most readers, like myself, will be amazed at the wealth of information about women’s same-sex love that Faderman has uncovered. She rescues from heterosexual obscurity Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Wollstonecraft Montagu, Anna Seward, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edith Somerville, “Michael Field,” and many others, including the Scottish schoolmistresses whose lesbian libel suit inspired Lillian Hellman’s The Children’s Hour. Faderman has also written on the theme of same-sex love and romantic friendship in poems and letters of Emily Dickinson; in novels by Henry James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; and in popular magazine fiction of the early twentieth century.37

Faderman is preeminent among those critics who are attempting to establish a lesbian tradition by rereading writers of the past previously assumed to be heterosexual or “spinsters.” As songwriter Holly Near expresses it: “Lady poet of great acclaim/ I have been misreading you/ I never knew your poems were meant for me.”38 It is in this area of lesbian scholarship that the most controversy—and some of the most exciting work—occurs. Was Mary Wollstonecraft’s passionate love for Fanny Blood, recorded in Mary, A Fiction, lesbian? Does Henry James dissect a lesbian relationship in The Bostonians? Did Emily Dickinson address many of her love poems to a woman, not a man? How did Virginia Woolf’s relationships with Vita Sackville-West and Ethel Smythe affect her literary vision? Not only are some lesbian critics increasingly naming such women and relationships “lesbian,” they are also suggesting that criticism cannot fail to take into account the influence of sexual and emotional orientation on literary expression.

In the establishment of a self-conscious literary tradition, certain writers have become focal points both for critics and for lesbians in general, who affirm and celebrate their identity by “naming names,” establishing a sense of historical continuity and community through the knowledge that incontrovertibly great women were also lesbians. Foremost among these heroes (or “heras”) are the women who created the first self-identified lesbian feminist community in Paris during the early years of the twentieth century. With Natalie Barney at its hub, this circle included such notable writers as Colette, Djuna Barnes, Radclyffe Hall, Renée Vivien, and, peripherally, Gertrude Stein. Contemporary lesbians—literary critics, historians, and layreaders—have been drawn to their mythic and mythmaking presence, seeing in them a vision of lesbian society and culture that may have existed.
raised by definition, silence and coding, and absence of tradition, lesbian critics have begun to develop a critical stance. Often this stance involves peering into shadows, into the spaces between words, into what has been unspoken and barely imagined. It is a perilous critical adventure with results that may violate accepted norms of traditional criticism, but which may also transform our notions of literary possibility.

One of the first tasks of this emerging lesbian criticism has been to provide lesbians with a tradition, even if a retrospective one. Jane Rule, whose Lesbian Images appeared about the same time as Literary Women, first attempted to establish this tradition. Although her text is problematic, relying overly much on biographical evidence and derivative interpretations and including some questionable writers (such as Dorothy Baker) while omitting others, Lesbian Images was a milestone in lesbian criticism. Its importance is partially suggested by the fact that it took five years for another complete book—Faderman's—to appear on lesbian literature. In a review of Lesbian Images, I questioned the existence of a lesbian “great tradition” in literature, but now I think I was wrong. Along with Rule, Dolores Klaich in Woman Plus Woman and Louise Bernikow in the introduction to The World Split Open have explored the possibility of a lesbian tradition, and recent critics such as Faderman and Cook in particular have begun to define that tradition, who belongs to it, and what links the writers who can be identified as lesbians. Cook's review of lesbian literature and culture in the early twentieth century proposes “to analyze the literature and attitudes out of which the present lesbian feminist works have emerged, and to examine the continued denials and invalidation of the lesbian experience.” Focusing on the recognized lesbian networks in France and England that included Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Ethel Smythe, Gertrude Stein, Radclyffe Hall, Natalie Barney, and Romaine Brooks, Cook provides an important outline of a lesbian cultural tradition and an insightful analysis of the distortions and denials of homophobic scholars, critics, and biographers.

Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men, like her earlier critical articles, ranges more widely through a literary tradition of romantic love between women (whether or not one calls that “lesbian”) from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Her thesis is that passionate love between women was labeled neither abnormal nor undesirable—probably because women were perceived to be asexual—until the sexologists led by Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis “morbidified” female friendship around 1900.
of the struggle to be one’s self. Her own identity is not shaped as she moves into relation with a man.” Similarly, Elizabeth Fifer points out that Stein's situation encouraged her to experiment with parody, theatricality, role playing, and “the diversity of ways possible to look at homosexual love and at her love object.” Dierdre Vanderlinde finds in Three Lives “one of the earliest attempts to find a new language in which to say, ‘I, woman-loving woman, exist.’” Catherine Stimpson places more critical emphasis on Stein’s use of masculine pronouns and conventional language, but despite what may have been her compromise, Stimpson feels that female bonding in Stein provides her with a private solution to woman's mind-body split.44

Along with Stein, Dickinson's woman-identification has drawn the most attention from recent critics, and has generated considerable controversy between lesbian and other feminist critics. Faderman insists that Dickinson's love for women must be considered homosexual, and that critics must take into account her sexuality (or affectionality). Like most critics who accept this lesbian identification of Dickinson, she points to Susan Gilbert Dickinson as Emily's primary romantic and sexual passion. Both Faderman and Bernikow thus argue that Dickinson's “muse” was sometimes a female figure as well as a male.45 Some of this work can be justifiably criticized for too closely identifying literature with life; however, by altering our awareness of what is possible—namely, that Dickinson's poetry was inspired by her love for a woman—we also can transform our response to the poetry. Paula Bennett daringly suggests that Dickinson's use of crumbs, jewels, pebbles, and similar objects was an attempt to create “clitoral imagery.” In a controversial paper on the subject, Nadean Bishop argues forcefully that the poet's marriage poems must be reread in light of what she considers to have been Dickinson's consummated sexual relationship with her sister-in-law.46

The establishment of a lesbian literary tradition, a “canon,” as my lengthy discussion suggests, has been the primary task of critics writing from a lesbian feminist perspective. But it is not the only focus to emerge. For example, lesbian critics, like feminist critics in the early seventies, have begun to analyze the images, stereotypes, and mythic presence of lesbians in fiction by or about lesbians. Bertha Harris, a major novelist as well as a provocative and trailblazing critic, considers the lesbian to be the prototype of the monster and “the quintessence of all that is female; and female enraged . . . . a lesbian is . . . . that which has been unspeakable about women.”47 Harris offers this monstrous lesbian as a
only once before—on the original island of Lesbos. More interest, however, has been paid to their lives so far than to their art. Barnes's portraits of decadent, tormented lesbians and homosexuals in Nightwood and silly, salacious ones in The Ladies Almanack often prove troublesome to lesbian readers and critics. However, Elaine Marks's perceptive study of French lesbian writers traces a tradition and how it has changed, modified by circumstance and by feminism, from the Sappho of Renée Vivien to the amazons of Monique Wittig.

The problems inherent in reading lesbian literature primarily for role modeling is most evident with Hall—the most notorious of literary lesbians—whose archetypal “butch,” Stephen Gordon, has bothered readers since the publication of The Well of Loneliness. Although one critic praises it as “the standard by which all subsequent similar works are measured,” most contemporary lesbian feminists would, I believe, agree with Faderman's harsh condemnation that it “helped to wreak confusion in young women.” Such an extraliterary debate is not limited to lesbian novels and lesbian characters; I am reminded of the intense disappointment expressed by many feminists over George Eliot’s disposal of Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch. In both cases, the cry is the same: why haven't these writers provided us with appropriate role models? Cook may be justified in criticizing Hall for creating a narrow and debilitating image for lesbians who follow, but my reading of the novel (and that of Catherine Stimpson in an excellent study of the lesbian novel) convinces me that both Hall's hero and message are highly complex. In looking to writers for a tradition, we need to recognize that the tradition may not always be a happy one. Women like Stephen Gordon exist alongside characters like Molly Bolt, in Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle, but lesbians may also question whether or not the incarnation of a “politically correct” but elusive and utopian mythology provides our only appropriate role model.

As with Hall, many readers and critics are strongly antipathetic to Stein, citing her reactionary and antifeminist politics and her role-playing relationship with Alice B. Toklas. However, other critics, by carefully analyzing Stein's actual words, establish, convincingly to my reading, that she did have a lesbian feminist perspective, calling into question assumptions about coding and masculine role playing. Cynthia Secor, who is developing an exciting lesbian feminist interpretation of Stein, argues that her novel Ida attempts to discover what it means to be a female person, and that the author profited from her position on the boundaries of patriarchal society: “Stein's own experience as a lesbian gives her a critical distance that shapes her understanding.
such diverse writers as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Kate Millett, and Elana Dykewoman, claim that "a feminist aesthetic, as it emerges out of women's evolution, grounds itself in female consciousness and in the unrelenting language of process and change."52 In this article, the authors do not call their feminist aesthetic a lesbian feminist aesthetic, although all the writers they discuss are, in fact, lesbians. Susan Wolfe later confronted this fact: "Few women who continue to identify with men can risk the male censure of 'women's style,' and few escape the male perspective long enough to attempt it."53 Through examples from Kate Millett, Jill Johnston, and Monique Wittig, she illustrates her contention that lesbian literature is characterized by the use of the continuous present, unconventional grammar and neologism; and that it breaks boundaries between art and the world, between events and our perceptions of them, and between past, present, and the dream world. It is, as even the proponents of this theory admit, highly debatable that all lesbian writers are modernists, or that all modernists are lesbians. If Virginia Woolf wrote in non-linear, stream-of-consciousness style because she was a lesbian (or "woman-identified") how does one explain Dorothy Richardson whose Pilgrimage, despite one lesbian relationship, is primarily heterosexual? If both Woolf and Richardson can be called "feminist" stylists, then how does one explain the nonlinear experimentation of James Joyce or Alain Robbe-Grillet, for example? The holes that presently exist in this theory should not, however, detract from the highly suggestive overlap between experimental and lesbian writers. Nor should we ignore the clear evidence that many contemporary, self-conscious lesbian writers (such as Wittig, Johnston, Bertha Harris and June Arnold) are choosing an experimental style as well as content.

This development of a self-conscious lesbian literature and literary theory in recent years has led a number of critics to investigate the unifying themes and values of current literature. Such an attempt has been made by Elly Bulkin, who traces the various sources of contemporary lesbian poetry, analyzes "the range of lesbian voices," and advises feminist teachers how to teach lesbian poetry. Mary Carruthers, in asking why so much contemporary feminist poetry is also lesbian, observes that the "lesbian love celebrated in contemporary women's poetry requires an affirmation of the value of femaleness, women's bodies, women's sexuality—in women's language."54 Jane Gurko and Sally Gearhart compare contemporary lesbian and gay male literature, attempting to discern to what extent one or the other transforms heterosexual ideology. They claim that, unlike gay male literature, lesbian literature "does express a revolutionary model of sexuality which in its structure, its content, and its
female archetype who subverts traditional notions of female submissiveness, passivity, and virtue. Her "tooth-and-claw" image of the lesbian is ironically similar to that of Ellen Moers, although from a lesbian rather than heterosexual point of view. But the very fact that Moers presents the lesbian-as-monster in a derogatory context and Harris in a celebratory one suggests that there is an important dialectic between how the lesbian articulates herself and how she is articulated and objectified by others. Popular culture, in particular, exposes the objectifying purpose of the lesbian-as-monster image, such as the lesbian vampire first created by Joseph Sheridan LeFanu’s 1871 ghost story, “Carmilla,” and revived in early 1970s “B” films as a symbolic attack on women’s struggle for self-identity.48 Other critics also have analyzed the negative symbolic appearance of the lesbian in literature. Ann Allen Shockley, reviewing black lesbian characters in American fiction, notes that “within these works exists an undercurrent of hostility, trepidation, subtlety, shadiness, and in some instances, ignorance culling forth homophobic stereotypes.”49 Homophobic stereotypes are also what Judith McDaniel and Maureen Brady find in abundance in recent commercial fiction (such as Kinflicks, A Sea Change, Some Do and How to Save Your Own Life) by avowedly feminist novelists. Although individuals might disagree with McDaniel and Brady’s severe criticism of specific novels, their overall argument is unimpeachable. Contemporary feminist fiction, by perpetuating stereotyped characters and themes (such as the punishment theme so dear to pre-feminist lesbian literature), serves to “disempower the lesbian.”50 Lesbian, as well as heterosexual, writers present the lesbian as Other, as Julia Penelope Stanley discovered in prefeminist fiction: “the lesbian character creates for herself a mythology of darkness, a world in which she moves through dreams and shadows.”51 Lesbian critics may wish to avoid this analysis of the lesbian as Other because we no longer wish to dwell upon the cultural violence done against us. Yet this area must be explored until we strip these stereotypes of their inhibiting and dehumanizing presence in our popular culture and social mythology.

Lesbian critics have also delved into the area of stylistics and literary theory. If we have been silenced for centuries and speak an oppressor’s tongue, then liberation for the lesbian must begin with language. Some writers may have reconciled their internal censor with their speech by writing in code, but many critics maintain that modern lesbian writers, because they are uniquely alienated from the patriarchy, experiment with its literary style and form. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan Wolfe, considering
Exposing one's self to public scrutiny as a lesbian may in fact entail marginality through denial of tenure or loss of job, and those lesbians willing to risk these consequences usually have a political position that justifies their risk. However, to me it seems imperative that lesbian criticism develop diversity in theory and approach. Much as lesbians, even more than heterosexual feminists, may mistrust systems of thought developed by and associated with men and male values, we may, in fact, enrich our work through the insights of Marxist, structuralist, semiotic, or even psychoanalytic criticism. Perhaps "male" systems of thought are incompatible with a lesbian literary vision, but we will not know until we attempt to integrate these ideas into our work.59

Similarly, lesbian criticism and cultural theory in general can only gain by developing a greater specificity, historically and culturally. We have tended to write and act as if lesbian experience—which is perceived as that of a contemporary, white middle-class feminist—is universal and unchanging. Although most lesbians know that this is not the case, we too often forget to apply rigorous historical and cross-cultural tools to our scholarship. Much of this ahistoricity occurs around the shifting definitions of lesbianism from one era and one culture to another. To state simply that Wollstonecraft "was" a lesbian because she passionately loved Fanny Blood, or Susan B. Anthony was a lesbian because she wrote amorous letters to Anna Dickinson, without accounting for historical circumstances, may serve to distort or dislocate the actual meaning of these women's lives (just as it is disturbing to deny their love for women). There are also notable differences among the institution of the berdache (the adoption by one sex of the opposite gender role) in Native American tribes; faute de mieux lesbian activity tolerated in France (as in Colette's Claudine novels); idyllic romantic friendships (such as that of the famous Ladies of Llangollen); and contemporary self-conscious lesbianism. I do believe that there is a common structure—a lesbian "essence"—that may be located in all these specific historical existences, just as we may speak of a widespread, perhaps universal, structure of marriage or the family. However, in each of these cases—lesbianism, marriage, the family—careful attention to history teaches us that differences are as significant as similarities, and vital information about female survival may be found in the different ways in which women have responded to their historical situation. This tendency toward simplistic universalism is accompanied by what I see as a dangerous development of biological determinism and a curious revival of the nineteenth-century feminist notion of female (now lesbian) moral superiority—that women are uniquely caring and superior to inherently
practice defies the fundamental violent assumptions of patriarchal culture. There is a danger in this attempt to establish a characteristic lesbian vision or literary value system, one that is well illustrated by this article. In an attempt to say this is what defines a lesbian literature, we are easily tempted to read selectively, omitting what is foreign to our theories. Most contemporary lesbian literature does embrace a rhetoric of non violence, but this is not universally true; for example, M. F. Beal’s Angel Dance is a lesbian hard-boiled detective novel and Monique Wittig’s Le Corps lesbien is infused with a violent eroticism that is, nonetheless, intensely nonpatriarchal. Violence, role playing, disaffection, unhappiness, suicide, and self-hatred, to name a few “taboo” subjects, all exist within the lesbian culture, and a useful criticism will have to effectively analyze these as lesbian themes and issues, regardless of ideological purity.

Lesbian feminist criticism faces a number of concerns that must be addressed as it grows in force and clarity. Among these concerns is the fact that this criticism is dominated by the politics of lesbian separatism. This is exemplified by the following statement from Sinister Wisdom, a journal that has developed a consistent and articulate separatist politics,

'lesbian consciousness’ is really a point of view, a view from the boundary. And in a sense every time a woman draws a circle around her psyche, saying ‘this is a room of my own,’ and then writes from within that ‘room,’ she’s inhabiting lesbian consciousness.

The value of separatism which, I believe, has always provided the most exciting theoretical developments in lesbian ideology, is precisely this marginality: lesbian existence “on the periphery of patriarchy.” Separatism provides criticism, as it did for lesbian politics, a cutting edge and radical energy that keeps us moving forward rather than backward either from fear or complacency. Those critics who maintain a consciously chosen position on the boundaries (and not one imposed by a hostile society) help to keep lesbian and feminist criticism radical and provocative, preventing both from becoming another arm of the established truth. At the same time, however, it is essential that separatist criticism does not itself become an orthodoxy, and thus repetitive, empty, and resistant to change. Lesbian criticism, as Kolodny has argued about feminist criticism, has more to gain from resisting dogma than from monotheism. Understandably, those critics and scholars willing to identify themselves publicly as lesbians also have tended to hold radical politics of marginality.
active lesbian publishing houses) leaves many major works unavailable, possibly forever. As the boom in gay literature subsides, teachers of literature will find it very difficult to unearth teachable texts. Scholars have the excellent Arno Press series, Homosexuality: Lesbians and Gay Men in Society, History, and Literature, but, as Faderman’s monumental scholarship reveals, far more lesbian literature exists than anyone has suspected. This literature needs to be unearthed, analyzed, explicated, perhaps translated, and made available to readers.

As lesbian critics, we also need to address the exclusion of lesbian literature from not merely the traditional, but also the feminist canon. Little lesbian literature has been integrated into the mainstream of feminist texts, as evidenced by what is criticized, collected, and taught. It is a matter of serious concern that lesbian literature is omitted from anthologies or included in mere token amounts, or that critical works and Modern Language Association panels still exclude lesbianism. It may as yet be possible for heterosexual feminists to claim ignorance about lesbian literature; however, lesbian critics should make it impossible for that claim to stand much longer. Lesbianism is still perceived as a minor and somewhat discomforting variation within the female life cycle, when it is mentioned at all. Just as we need to integrate lesbian material and perspectives into the traditional and feminist canons, we might also apply lesbian theory to traditional literature. Feminists have not only pointed out the sexism in many canonical works, but have also provided creative and influential rereadings of these works; similarly lesbians might contribute to the rereading of the classics. For example, The Bostonians, an obvious text, has been reread often from a lesbian perspective, and we could reinterpret D. H. Lawrence’s anti-feminism or Doris Lessing’s compromised feminism (particularly in The Golden Notebook) by relating these attitudes to their fear of or discomfort with lesbianism. Other texts or selections of texts—such as Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” or the relationship between Lucy Snowe and Ginevra Fanshawe in Villette—might reveal a subtext that could be called lesbian. Just as few texts escape a feminist re-vision, few might invade a lesbian transformation.

This last point—that there is a way in which we might “review” literature as lesbians—brings me to my conclusion. In a brief period of a few years, critics have begun to demonstrate the existence of a distinct lesbian aesthetic, just as feminists have outlined elements of a female aesthetic. Certain components of this aesthetic or critical perspective are clear:
violent males. Although only an undertone in some criticism and literature, any such sociobiological impulse should be questioned at every appearance.

The denial of meaningful differences among women is being challenged, particularly around the issue of racism. Bulkin has raised criticisms about the racism of white lesbian feminist theory. She has written that

if I can put together—or think someone else can put together—a viable piece of feminist criticism or theory whose base is the thought and writing of white women/lesbians and expect that an analysis of racism can be tacked on or dealt with later as a useful addition, it is a measure of the extent to which I partake of that white privilege.60

Implicit in the criticism of Bulkin and other antiracist writers is the belief that lesbians, because of our experience of stigma and exclusion from the feminist mainstream, ought to be particularly sensitive to the dynamic between oppression and oppressing. White lesbians who are concerned about eradicating racism in criticism and theory have been greatly influenced as well by the work of several black lesbian feminist literary critics, such as Gloria T. Hull, Barbara Smith, and Lorraine Bethel.61 Such concern is not yet present over the issue of class, although the historical association of lesbianism with upper-class values has often been used by left-wing political groups and governments to deny legitimacy to homosexual rights and needs. Lesbian critics studying the Barney circle, for example, might analyze the historical connections between lesbianism and class status. Lesbian critics might also develop comparisons among the literatures of various nationalities because the lesbian canon is of necessity cross-national. We have barely explored the differences between American, English, French, and German lesbian literature (although Surpassing the Love of Men draws some distinctions), let alone non-Western literature. The paucity of lesbian scholars trained in these literatures has so far prevented the development of a truly international lesbian literary canon.

As lesbian criticism matures, we may anticipate the development of ongoing and compelling political and practical concerns. At this time, for example, lesbians are still defining and discovering texts. We are certainly not as badly off as we were in the early seventies when the only lesbian novels in print were The Well of Loneliness, Rubyfruit Jungle, and Isabel Miller’s Patience and Sarah. However, texts published prior to 1970 are still difficult to find, and even The Well of Loneliness is intermittently available at the whim of publishers.62 Furthermore, the demise of Diana Press and the apparent slowdown of Daughters (two of the most
value to all feminists in raising awareness of entrenched heterosexism in existing texts, clarifying the lesbian traditions in literature through scholarship and reinterpretation, pointing out barriers that have stood in the way of free lesbian expression, explicating the recurring themes and values of lesbian literature, and exposing the dehumanizing stereotypes of lesbians in our culture. Many of the issues that face lesbian critics—resisting dogma, expanding the canon, creating a non-racist and non-classist critical vision, transforming our readings of traditional texts, and exploring new methodologies—are the interests of all feminist critics. Because feminism concerns itself with the removal of limitations and impediments in the way of female imagination, and lesbian criticism helps to expand our notions of what is possible for women, then all women would grow by adopting for themselves a lesbian vision. Disenfranchised groups have had to adopt a double-vision for survival; one of the political transformations of recent decades has been the realization that enfranchised groups—men, whites, heterosexuals, the middle class—would do well to adopt that double-vision for the survival of us all. Lesbian literary criticism simply restates what feminists already know, that one group cannot name itself “humanity” or even “woman”: “We’re not trying to become part of the old order misnamed ‘universal’ which has tabooed us; we are transforming the meaning of ‘universality.’”

Whether lesbian criticism will survive depends as much upon the external social climate as it does upon the creativity and skill of its practitioners. If political attacks on gay rights and freedom grow; it the so-called Moral Majority wins its fight to eliminate gay teachers and texts from the schools (it would be foolhardy to believe they will exempt universities); and if the academy, including feminist teachers and scholars, fails to support lesbian scholars, eradicate heterosexist values and assumptions, and incorporate the insights of lesbian scholarship into the mainstream; then current lesbian criticism will probably suffer the same fate as did Jeanette Foster’s Sex Variant Women in the fifties. Lesbian or heterosexual, we will all suffer from that loss.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the first annual convention of the National Women’s Studies Association, Lawrence, Kansas, May 1979.

1 Lynn Strongin, “Sayre,” in Rising Tides: Twentieth Century American Women

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Perhaps lesbian feminist criticism [or literature, I would add] is a political or thematic perspective, a kind of imagination that can see beyond the barriers of heterosexuality, role stereotypes, patterns of language and culture that may be repressive to female sexuality and expression.  

A lesbian artist very likely would express herself differently about sexuality, the body, and relationships. But are there other—less obvious—unifying themes, ideas, and imagery that might define a lesbian text or subtext? How, for example, does the lesbian's sense of outlaw status affect her literary vision? Might lesbian writing, because of the lesbian's position on the boundaries, be characterized by a particular sense of freedom and flexibility or, rather, by images of violently imposed barriers, the closet? Or, in fact, is there a dialectic between freedom and imprisonment unique to lesbian writing? Do lesbians have a special perception of suffering and stigma, as so much prefeminist literature seems to suggest? What about the "muse," the female symbol of literary creativity: do women writers create a lesbian relationship with their muse as May Sarton asserts? If so, do those writers who choose a female muse experience a freedom from inhibition because of that fact, or might there be a lack of creative tension in such a figurative same-sex relationship? I feel on solid ground in asserting that there are certain topics and themes that define lesbian culture, and that we are beginning to define a lesbian symbolism. Lesbian literature may present a unified tradition of thematic concerns such as that of unrequited longing, a longing of almost cosmic totality because the love object is denied not by circumstance or chance, but by necessity. The tension between romantic love and genital sexuality takes a particular form in woman-to-woman relationships, often articulated through musings on the difference between purity and impurity (culminating in Colette's study of variant sexuality, The Pure and the Impure). Lesbian literature approaches the theme of development or the quest in a manner different from that of men or heterosexual women. Lesbian literature, as lesbian culture in general, is particularly flexible on issues of gender and role identification; even The Well of Loneliness hints at the tragedy of rigid gender roles. Because of this flexibility, lesbian artists and writers have always been fascinated with costuming, because dress is an external manifestation of gender roles lesbians often reject. As we read and reread literature from a lesbian perspective, I am confident we will continue to expand our understanding of the lesbian literary tradition and a lesbian aesthetic.

This essay has suggested the vigor of lesbian criticism and its
years. Currently, networking continues through conferences, journals, and other institutionalized outlets. The Lesbian-Feminist Study Clearinghouse reprints articles, bibliographies, and syllabi pertinent to lesbian studies. See note 5 for the address. The Lesbian History Archives collects all material documenting lesbian lives past or present; their address is P.O. Box 1258, New York, New York 10001. Matrices, "A Lesbian-Feminist Research Newsletter," is a network of information about research projects, reference materials, calls for papers, bibliographies, and so forth. There are several regional editors; the managing editor is Bobby Lacy, 4000 Randolph, Lincoln, Nebraska 68510.


20 Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Conditions: Two 1, no. 2 (October 1977): 39. It is sometimes overlooked that Smith's pathbreaking article on black feminist criticism is also a lesbian feminist analysis.


22 Bertha Harris, quoted by Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," p. 33.

23 Supportive historical and biographical information about women writers can be found in a number of recent articles, in addition to those cited elsewhere in this paper. See, for example, Judith Schwarz, "Yellow Clover: Katherine Lee Bates and Katherine Coman, pp. 59-67; Josephine Donovan, "The Unpublished Love Poems of Sarah Orne Jewett, pp. 26-31; and Margaret Cruikshank, "Geraldine Jewsbury and Jane Carlyle," pp. 50-64, all in Special Issue on Lesbian History, Frontiers 4, no. 3 (Fall 1979).


29 Two male critics--Edmund Wilson and Robert Bridgman--first suggested the connection between Stein's obscurity and her lesbianism. Jane Ruck in Lesbian Images and Dolores Kech in Woman Plus Woman (see note 35) both follow their analysis. Cynthia Secor has argued that Stein did declare her lesbianism in her writing ("Can We Call Gertrude Stein a Non-Declared Lesbian Writer?") in a paper presented at the MLA convention, San Francisco, December 1979. For more on Stein, see note 44.

30 Bullfin, "'Kissing Against the Light,'" p. 8.
This survey is limited to published and unpublished essays in literary criticism that present a perspective either sympathetic to lesbianism or those explicitly lesbian in orientation. It is limited to literature and to theoretical articles (not book reviews). The sexual preference of the authors is, for the most part, irrelevant; this is an analysis of lesbian feminist ideas, not authors. Although the network of lesbian critics is well developed, some major unpublished papers may have escaped my attention.

Elizabeth Fox-Genkin, “Kissing Against the Light: A Look at Lesbian Poetry,” *Radical Teacher* 10 (December 1978): 8. This article was reprinted in *College English and Women’s Studies Newsletter,* an expanded version is available from the Lesbian-Feminist Study Clearinghouse, Women’s Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260.

Julia Penelope [Stanley], “The Articulation of Bias: Hoof in Mouth Disease,” paper presented at the 1979 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, San Francisco, November 1979, pp. 4-5. On the same panel, I presented a paper on “Heterosexism in Literary Anthologies,” which develops some of the points of this paragraph.


52 Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe, "Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," Chrysalis, no. 6, p. 66.


54 Mary Carnes, "Imagining Women: Notes Toward a Feminist Poetic," Massachusetts Review 20, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 301.


59 For example, a panel at the 1980 MLA convention (Houston), "Literary History and the New Histories of Sexuality," presented gay and lesbian perspectives on contemporary French philosophies.
