

"For This Girl Was My Grand Passion..."

Re-interpreting the First Large Scale Survey Of

by Margot Francis

L'article examine les contradictions entourant la construction changeante du désir dans un contexte historique en se basant sur la première recherche empirique sur la sexualité des femmes américaines (1929), ainsi que sur la littérature de la même période concernant la sexualité des hommes.

A lived sexuality often undoes the categories we have created to name it.

Following two decades of innovative work in lesbian and gay studies most scholars now agree that the shifting and unstable terrain of history and culture exert a profound influence on sexuality (Vance). In light of this growing consensus new questions about the most constructive approaches for historical inquiry are emerging. For example, if sexuality is socially constructed, do the parameters of "lesbian and gay" history limit our understanding of the diverse ways in which eroticism, gender, and intimacy are constituted? Further, does this framework re-enforce heterosexual/homosexual binaries, and reproduce heterosexuality as the invisible and therefore un-examined "norm"? And, more importantly, does it actually represent the full, complex, and often contradictory lives of the individuals and communities historians hope to reclaim?¹

While the project of re-constructing gay and lesbian history has provided us with the outlines for a nineteenth and twentieth century "Homosexual Hall of Fame"—Virginia Woolfe, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway, Hilda Doolittle and Harlem Renaissance figures Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Countee Cullen—the realities of "homosexual"

desire itself within this period remain a matter of fierce dispute. This is particularly the case when one recognizes that many of the historical figures claimed by gay and lesbian history had relationships of significance with both sexes, for example, all of the figures listed above (Garber).

Given the hetero-homo binary that dominates western thinking the question that will inevitably arise is: but what were they, *really*? However, perhaps for some, the question of whether someone was "really" straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual misrecognizes the nature of the problem. Rather than lobbying to fit historical figures into the rapidly imploding categories of sexual identity, perhaps the most fruitful questions have to do with the possibility that a lived sexuality often *undoes* the categories we have created to name it.

This is not to say that I advocate lapsing back into the undifferentiated politic of "we're all the same," and failing to recognize the differences in social power, legitimacy, and oppression that profoundly affect those who have lived on the margins of "normalcy" throughout different historical periods. However, while we must acknowledge the specific risks, courage, and communities created by those who lived their sexual choices openly, we should at the same time attempt to understand the complex forces constructing desire.

To illustrate the problems inherent in binary assumptions about desire this article will examine the first large scale empirical survey of women's sexuality in the United States (1929), and review recent research about men's sexual and relational practices during the same period.

The importance of this kind of historical inquiry can be found in it's potential to provide a range of paradigms for sexuality beyond the more essentialist models now common in

human rights based education and discourse. I would hope this diversity *opens up* options for desire, intimacy, and friendship, beyond that which might be possible within more unitary notions of "identity." The model of sexuality now common in anti-homophobia work and "coming out" narratives posits that desire is an identifiable and isolated kernel of self-knowledge which rests at the centre of our psyche revealing an individual's "true" orientation. However, the historical studies reviewed here suggest that many of those who went before us exploring the possibilities inherent in queer, deviant, and feminist sexual choices constructed quite different worlds for desire.

Sketching the context

During the period between 1900 and 1930 the United States witnessed a rapid expansion in the wage labour system and urbanization providing the context for increasing numbers of women to live independent of the heterosexual family. For most women, low wages and occupational segregation made marriage a financial necessity, but for a small group in the white, upper and middle classes their newly won right to education brought opportunities for employment and the creation of independent lives. During the period between 1880-1900 only ten per cent of American women remained unmarried; however, 50 per cent of college women during the same period were single (Faderman 1991). These "New Women," as they were called, made up over a third of the entire college student population (40,000) (Faderman 1991), and by 1920, 75 per cent of female professionals were single (Rapp and Ross). It is these "New Women" that were the focus of the study of women's sexuality reviewed here.

Women's Sexuality in America (1929)

Studying women's sexuality

In 1918 Katherine Bement Davis embarked on the first major survey of women's sexual behaviour to be undertaken in America. Sponsored by the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Bureau of Social Hygiene, the research was published in 1929 under the title *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-two*

Women's romantic friendships were indeed often sexually expressive.

*Hundred Women.*² To my knowledge no large scale accounts of white working class, Black, Asian, or Native women's sexuality exist for this period. Although Davis had a limited focus, the study represents a unique and important resource both for the breadth of its survey approach, and for the resistance its findings imply to the dominant views about "normal" white, middle-class women's sexuality. While the specific impetus for this inquiry came from the Bureau's commitment to abolishing prostitution and venereal disease, the actual results of the study had the unintended effect of casting doubt on some of the principal assumptions of the social purity campaign it had been intended to bolster.

The Davis report provided textual evidence that over 50 per cent of the 1200 single women surveyed had had intense emotional relationships with women, and more than half of these (over 25 per cent of the total) had been decidedly sexual (identified by Davis as "mutual masturbation, contact of the genital organs, or other physical expression generally recognized as sexual in character" (277). The report also documented the experiences of 1000 married women of whom 30 per cent had fallen in love with another

woman, and half of these relationships (15 per cent) had been sexual (Davis 298). As these figures suggest they alone are significant enough to render binary assumptions about the exclusive and contradictory nature of hetero- and homosexualities problematic, at least in turn of the century America.

Surprisingly, earlier historians of women's sexuality have devoted little attention to the Davis survey. For example, in *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* Lillian Faderman devotes just one page to Davis' findings, despite the fact that the report is the sole empirical study of romantic friendships in existence. While the study provides a remarkable store of data indicating that women's romantic friendships were indeed often sexually expressive, Faderman leaves this material unexamined. Instead she uses the report to bolster her central theme, namely that *non-sexual* romantic friendships were a recognized and common experience for middle-class women of this period.³

Women resisting sexual normalcy

Of the 312 single women who had intense emotional relationships with women, which were also sexually expressive, Davis provides her readers with nine case studies. In eight out of the nine studies the women characterized their same-sex experiences in remarkably positive terms. For example, Case Number Four writes that her relationship with another woman,

has arisen as an expression of love, which is the only way I have experienced it, and I am qualified to judge. It has proved helpful and has made my life inexpressibly richer and deeper. I would not have been without

the experience for worlds. (Davis 283)

Similarly, Case Number One, a nurse who has had a woman partner for two years, comments that she "is as much a real mate as a husband would be." She continues,

I have come to think that certain women, many, in fact, possibly most of those who are unmarried, are more attracted to women than to men, through no fault of their own, but inherent in their nature; and I am somewhat inclined to think that to mate with one woman is as natural and as healthful and helpful for them as are marital relations between husband and wife. In my own case it has had a decidedly softening and sweetening effect on my temper and general attitude. (Davis 280)

In the one case that was not wholly positive, problems seemed to arise as a result of the shame these women felt at their decidedly physical attraction for each other.

"Certain women are more attracted to women than to men, through no fault of their own."

I live with a girl friend in a small apartment. We were drawn together by physical attraction. It has made our life beautiful and more liveable in many ways. We express our affection for each other and the times are becoming more and more rare when it develops into something that both of us are ashamed of. We

have set out to overcome it and will, I believe, without losing a sincere and genuine love for each other. (Davis 285)

The Davis researchers were relentless in their inquiries about why the single women "failed to marry." To investigate this I turned to the two case studies provided in the text representing the many women who had sexual relationships both with

women and men. Here the reasons seem evident. The first explains her "failure" to marry as follows: "I have met so few eligible men that I could count them. Homosexualism has interfered. So have my

brains" (291). Reflecting the pathologizing of same-sex relationships in the discourse of the period, this woman evidenced considerable guilt about her four same-sex experiences, characterizing them as "inexcusable and debasing." However, she was nevertheless defiant and critical about the "stupid, cowardly, [and] hypocritical attitudes" evidenced by teachers and educators who cause "much unnecessary, harmful suffering to girls who feel that the world would regard them as pariahs, dirty, evil things, although they *know* they are not" (Davis 290, emphasis in original).

The second case study presents a woman who has had three sexual relationships with women and "more than one" encounter with men. Davis comments:

She does not regret not having married, as she says that since leaving college "my emotional life has been fed on the sex side ... I do not need the financial help of a husband. The many husbands I observe possessed by other women do not seem to me to have developed much of a genius for companionship with their wives." (293)

Thus despite powerful discourses mobilized to deter women's same-sex intimacy, over one-quarter of the single women in this study had sexual relationships with other women, and resisting the condemnation meted out to them, put pen to paper to document the power of connections they "would not have been without for the world" (283).

However, the problems with notions of sexual identity based on an exclusive heterosexual/homosexual binary are even more evident in Davis' research on married women's same-sex relations.

Countering the now popular assumption that sexuality can be described as an isolated kernel of self-knowledge which is separable from the rest of one's life, my reading of Davis' study suggests instead that external factors such as the opportunity for independence through education and employment effected women's choice of relationships. Indeed, Davis herself concludes that married women "who go out into the world to work, like those who go to college, are more apt to form such attachments" (312).

Of the 157 married women who fell in love and were also sexual with other women, Davis presents the reader with eight case studies. Here her selection was based on her desire to "illustrate several different points of homosexual experiences or raise important questions" (313). Thus some case studies characterize same-sex experiences as "helpful" and a "very perfect form of love" and others are laced with guilt and moral admonitions. However, these women certainly did *not* see their same-sex relationships as less compelling or passionate than their heterosexual relations. Indeed, those who condemned same-sex relationships seemed particularly aware that the "danger" inherent in these partnerships related to their extraordinary intensity. For example Case Number Eight refers to an earlier relationship with a woman saying, "After twelve years I love that girl in a way totally different from any other" (Davis 327). Case

Number Five narrates,

for this girl was my grand passion. She was a boyish girl we had the most radiant and spotless of comradeships. I have never before, nor since, felt for any man the rapture and ecstasy and self-immolating devotion that I felt toward that girl. When, after a long time it began to dawn on me that she was not on the square with me; that there were half a dozen girls who felt toward her as I did; and that she liked to receive what we gave and to give nothing of value to any of us in return I quit. The process of disillusionment was long and painful. It left a scar on me that none of my relations with men have ever left. (Davis 321)

Case Number Six provides another example of this theme.

In college several older women approached me with what, owing to an affair at the time, I knew to be perverted sex appeal. It repelled me unspeakably. About six years later I experienced the strongest love of my life for a much older woman who had had at least three such passions before. My whole life was deranged.... (Davis 323)

None of these examples describe a relationship which was entered into lightly. On the contrary, each case study describes a passionately felt emotional and sexual connection—along with the guilt and shame which often went with it—all of which existed prior to, or alongside of, these women's relationships with men.

It is precisely this terrain of passion and contradiction—evident in both the single and married women's accounts—that historians have sometimes glossed over or failed to explore. A variety of historians are culpable, both those who assume an always/already straight universe, and occasionally also, those investigating "lesbian and gay" history. Thus in so

Each case study describes a passionately felt emotional and sexual connection.

far as the either/or of “identity politics” shapes our investigation, we fail to allow history’s real challenge: the necessity of going beyond categories into the messy contradictions which make up women’s daily lives.

There are no empirical studies to provide textual indications about whether large numbers of working class white, Black, Asian, or Native American women also engaged in same-sex relationships, although a significant number of individually documented case studies do exist. Indeed the rationale for seeking out predominately white, middle-class participants for the Davis study was that this

It is this terrain of passion that historians have glossed over or failed to explore.

group could be considered a “respectable class of women.” Ironically, the notion that “respectable” women were “passionless,” and the belief that “real” sex was procreative, may have provided the protective cover which allowed this group to engage in same-sex relationships with relative impunity. While working-class women, especially those of colour, were always/already sexualized, white, middle-class women, precisely because they were assumed *not* to be sexual, may have had sufficient discursive protection, *to be*, particularly with each other.

Gender, masculinity, and sex

Interestingly, some of the most recent research on male sexuality also challenges the binary heterosexual/homosexual model, and indicates that a range of sexual practices were common among men. However, at the turn of the century it was usually working-class surroundings which provided the setting for the “bachelor subcultures” which nourished these connections. In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey argues that between 1850 and 1940 an all-male culture played a significant role in the lives of urban Italian, Irish, African-Ameri-

can, and Anglo-American men. Although many would go on to marry, about 40 per cent of men over 15 years old were unmarried at any given time. Chauncey suggests that differing constructions of gender played a pivotal role in the sexual activities considered permissible for “normal” men. Marshalling a wide range of discursive and material indicators he asserts that until the 1930s, particularly in working-class cultures, “normal” men could, and did, engage in sexual activity with other men without this threatening their status as normal so long as they did not take the “feminine” position in the sex act. Chauncey describes the working-man’s culture as one in which men could demonstrate their sexual virility by playing the “man’s part” in sexual encounters with women, and sometimes also with other men. Thus, in a world in which “every woman is just another place to enter,’ as one Italian teenager described the attitude of men at his neighbourhood pool hall in 1930, the body to enter did not necessarily have to be a woman’s” (84).

In middle-class male culture, however, the hetero-homosexual binary became hegemonic somewhat earlier, as the late nineteenth century saw bourgeois men utilizing sexual self-control as one crucial element in the attempt to distinguish themselves from the working classes. However, only a few decades earlier, in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century romantic friendships between men had been both common and accepted. Anthony Rotundo, who has studied the diaries of dozens of nineteenth-century men, argues that young men frequently slept together and felt free to express passionate love for each other. Drawing on Rotundo, Chauncey writes,

These ardent relationships were “common” and “socially acceptable.” Devoted male friends opened letters to each other with greetings like “Lovely Boy” and “Dearly Beloved”; they kissed and caressed one another; and, as in the case of Joshua Stead and

the bachelor lawyer Abraham Lincoln, they sometimes shared the same bed for years. Some men explicitly commented that they felt the same sort of love for both men and women. “All I know,” wrote one man quoted by Rotundo, “is that there are three persons in this world whom I have loved, and those are, Julia, John, and Anthony. Dear beloved trio.” It was only in the late nineteenth century that such love for other men became suspect, as men began to worry that it contained an unwholesome, distinctly homosexual element. (120)

While Rotundo argues, correctly, that these men cannot be classified as “homosexual” as no such conception existed in their culture, he nevertheless persists in calling them “heterosexuals.” However, one side of this binary relies on the other. As Jonathan Katz has argued in *The Invention of Heterosexuality* “normal” men and women only began to become “heterosexual” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when they started to make their “normalcy” contingent on renouncing such intimacies. This process proceeded at a different pace in different contexts and was dependent as we have seen, on gender, class, and race among other things.

The notion that “respectable” women were “passionless” provided the protective cover.

Unstable relations

What are we to make of the instability evident in these accounts? I would argue that although twentieth-century notions of sexuality as a biologically based and binary “identity” have been remarkably useful in the human rights based discourse used to organize a movement, they

provide little of the nuance and complexity necessary for understanding the notions of sexuality, gender, power, experimentation, friendship, and intimacy evident here. And yet it is exactly this historical richness that can aid us in understanding the contradictions evident in our own time and in our own movements.

In *ViceVersa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* Marjorie Garber notes that the story that is often told about these relationships is "the story of 'experimentation,' 'infatuation,' 'substitution,' and 'conversion,'" in which same-sex relationships are explained as not real, not serious, not permanent (324). She continues:

It is worth noting that the rewriting that takes place can be "gay" or "straight." We begin with the "end" of the story, and retell it so that it "comes out right," ... Freud called this "secondary revision" when he came to talk about how dreams work: It imposes a plausible narrative of continuity and logic over the heterogeneity of thoughts—and desires....

To call such feelings, as Havelock Ellis at one point tries to do, merely "love-fictions" or the "play of sexual love" is to hide from ourselves. It is simply emotional hypocrisy.

Something quite crucial is being *looked through* rather than *looked at*, described as part of one or another kind of erotic love, as if there were only two—as if life, like digital technology, were indisputably binary: gay or straight, male or female, immature or mature, child or adult. How many people looking at themselves and the course of their lives see only one or the other? (324)

What is forgotten, erased, or denied here is the sexuality of a lifetime, and the possibility that particular historical periods, including our own, may make certain forms of desire, inti-

macy, and friendship possible, and, at the same moment, preclude others.

There is no doubt that the contributions of scholars of bisexuality like Marjorie Garber have provided a critical and necessary impetus to this debate. At the same time I find myself questioning, with her, whether the linear addition of one more category, bisexuality, provides a sufficient resolution of these questions. Does a lived sexuality undo the categories we have created to name and control it?

Beginning in the late nineteenth century a vast medical literature created a new framework for understanding desire through the classification of binary sexual "identities" into categories of normalcy and deviance. This was, in fact, the same moment when larger numbers of men and an elite group of women could begin living independent of the heterosexual family. In this context, I would argue that notions of sexuality as a binary "identity," have been used both to *acknowledge* sexual differences, and paradoxically, have operated to *contain, regulate, and polarize* this instability.

As theorists from Michael Foucault to Judith Butler have argued, sexuality and gender are embodied, but not essential, social practices. Thus Butler suggests that identity categories ought to be understood and even *promoted* as the site of "necessary trouble" (14). If sexual categories are both inevitable, and inevitably troubling, I would argue that historians especially must *wear* these notions of "identity" lightly, so that they do not *contain* us, or contain the work of understanding desire. To do this, scholars must not erase the profound discontinuities found in historical texts—but instead *mine them*. For it is only in so doing that these histories can re-construct the passions which have made up both our movements and our lives.

Margot Francis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History and Philosophy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and is a Teaching Assistant in at the University of

Toronto. Her community work involves anti-homophobia education with youth.

¹In her presentation on "Teaching Lesbian and Gay History" at the "Lesbian and Gay History Conference: Defining a Field" (October 6-7, 1995, sponsored by the Graduate School and University Centre at the City University of New York), Lisa Duggan reported on the decision of Brown University to title their new LesBiGay History program the "Sexuality and Society Program" in recognition of this debate, and of the importance of including an investigation of hetero-normativity in research.

²Two smaller studies of women's sexuality pre-date the Davis report. The first is titled *The Single Woman* by Robert Dickinson and Lura Beam (1934) and was reviewed by Rosalind Rosenberg in *Beyond Separate Spheres* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1982). Dickinson's report is based on 46 cases, and as Rosenberg recounts he found that "homosexuality, which he at first failed to notice, even among patients who were living together, represented a widespread practice" (202). The second study, "Statistical Study of the Marriage of Forty-seven Women" in Volume 10 of *Hygiene and Physiology of Women* was compiled between 1892 and 1920 by Celia Duel Mosher. This unpublished work was reviewed by Carl Degler in "What Ought To Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century" in *American Historical Review* Vol. 79 (December 1974); and by Rosalind Rosenberg (as above). However, there is no indication that Mosher enquired about same-sex relations.

³At a panel on "Romantic Friendships" at the "Lesbian and Gay History: Defining a Field" conference, Faderman elaborated that her central purpose in this work had been to establish that the great mass of women who had had romantic friendships during these earlier periods could legitimately be claimed as foremothers of the more recent lesbian feminist movement. In her estimation, it was neither possible nor necessary to prove

that these women had genital contact in order to claim this connection. While I agree with this thesis, I also do not think that historians should ignore evidence of sexual contact when it is available. In addition, the project of mapping the social conditions which made this interruption of hetero-normative ideas and practices possible, is an important one.

References

- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, Harper Collins, 1994.
- Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1981.
- Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Garber, Marjorie. *ViceVersa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. *The Invention of Hetero Sexuality*. New York: A Dutton Book, 1995.
- Rapp, Rayna, and Ellen Ross. "The Twenties Backlash: Compulsory Heterosexuality, the Consumer Family, and the Waning of Feminism." *Class, Race and Sex*. Eds. Hanna Lessinger and Amy Swerdlow. Boston: G.K. Hall Publishers, 1983.
- Vance, Carole. "Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality." *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* Eds. Dennis Altman, et al. London: GMP Publishers, 1989.

ABI SLONE

tonite i told the womyn that i love,
that i wouldn't kiss her all the way
to the next Metro stop.
i told her the reason was because,
when i see the other couples doing it it makes me want to
yell...

RENT A ROOM.

i didn't tell her i was afraid
afraid of the people that sat & stood & smothered us.
i didn't tell her,
that sometimes
when i'm kissing her
& my eyes are closed & my entire body is aching for her
on the street corner,
that the image quickly changes into
blood bats & broken bones.
i didn't tell her that sometimes i don't feel i have the right
to call myself a lesbian, or a dyke, or queer
'cause i've never been bashed,
& i don't know what it's like to be warm with red
other than between my legs.
i didn't tell her
that i wonder
if she thinks i'm not really a dyke & i'm just pretending.
that she's going to leave me
'cause i can't recite lesbian politics from the beginning of
time
& i don't recognize names of dykes i should know if i want
to be in
the club.
that sometimes
i feel like i don't belong,
& when i talk that talk no one believes me,
she doesn't believe me.
i didn't tell her that when she fucks me i can feel her
inside me every thrust her.
i didn't tell her that she's
my butch in shining armour & i'll be her femme
in anything she wants me to & when she touches me the
world
disappears
& fuck anyone who holds a membership card to the moral
majority &
that i would fight & die for her & that she is my inspiration.
i told her what i needed, to feel
safestrongindependenttogether.
i told her what i can.

*Abi Slone is a Jewish Dyke, Blonde bombshell with a bad attitude,
obsessed with fighting the forces of evil, studying Women in Religion at
Concordia University.*