

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and transgender criticism

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The title of this chapter puts in roughly historical order related types of criticism that concentrate on varieties of what might be loosely termed sexual dissidence.¹ All of these labels emerge from dynamic mid- and late twentieth-century struggles to emancipate anti-normative sexual desires and gender identities from legal, medical and moral oppression. The word *gay*, for example – if traceable to male homosexual parlance of the Victorian era – became a politically charged term around which the short-lived Gay Liberation Front (GLF) of the late 1960s and early 1970s could mobilise demonstrations, festivals and marches that celebrated same-sex desires. Repudiating the clinical and pathological connotations often attached to the category homosexual (in use from at least the 1890s onwards),² the GLF upheld *gay* as an expression of pride in those desires between persons of the same sex that western cultures had for centuries outlawed and punished. In the annals of sexual history, GLF came into its own after the police attempted to raid the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located in Greenwich Village at New York City, on 27 June 1969. Rather than succumb to police harassment, the Stonewall's customers fought back at the authorities for two nights. Soon referred to simply as Stonewall, this upsurge of militancy immediately provoked – in John D'Emilio's words – 'intense discussion of what many had begun to memorialise as the first gay riot in history'.³

Spreading rapidly across the United States, the GLF soon established itself in other western nations such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. This movement derived its political energy from a broad repertoire of socialist

¹ The influential term 'sexual dissidence' is usually attributed to Jonathan Dollimore; see his theoretical study of (largely male) homosexual desire and sexual transgression, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

² Chris White observes that among the various late-nineteenth century terms for same-sex desire – including ones 'derived from classical mythology, or from a carefully "scientific" differentiation of normal and abnormal instincts' – the one to persist 'into modern language' is 'homosexuality'; the word (with its Greek prefix and Latin noun) 'was coined in 1869 by a man named Benkert, who has gone down in history as a Hungarian doctor' but was in fact 'a Swedish campaigner for the rights of those he called "homosexuals": 'General Introduction', in Chris White (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

³ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 233.

and leftist thought that energised Civil Rights groups, such as the Black Panthers and the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), in North America. Black politics, with its emphasis on Black pride, helped to shape the GLF's promulgation of gay pride. At this time, many activists involved in the GLF and the WLM were inspired by the writings of the Freudian theorist Herbert Marcuse, who in books such as *Eros and Civilisation* (1956) contested what he saw as the repressive attitudes towards eroticism afflicting modern culture.⁴ But as with many radical movements, internal divisions – as well as lack of central organisation – quickly dissipated the GLF's revolutionary fervour. Some critics such as Simon Watney argue that the movement lost direction when its members failed to agree on whether or not sexual emancipation remained subordinate to class struggle.⁵ Further tensions resulted from the ways in which lesbians often felt marginalised within what had turned into a male-dominated political alliance. As a result, some women activists found the WLM a more suitable environment in which to pursue a revolutionary politics that championed lesbian desire. Even though the term lesbian had been used from at least the early 1900s (the period when lesbian subcultures began to thrive in cities such as Berlin, London, New York and Paris), the word became deeply politicised in the WLM during the early 1970s: the decade when the celebration of lesbian identity sought to make female homosexuality socially visible. Towards the end of that decade, when the concept of sexual politics influenced social thought, it became increasingly common practice to acknowledge the gender differences within campaigns for homosexual emancipation by referring to lesbian *and* gay liberation, pride and rights.

The political ferment of the GLF and the WLM encouraged lesbian and gay intellectuals to devise critiques of how and why western cultures often violently proscribed same-sex desires. To be sure, much sexological research – originating in innumerable case studies compiled from the mid- to late nineteenth century onwards and taking their statistically most elaborate form in the two Kinsey Reports of 1948 and 1953⁶ – threw extensive light on homosexual activities, behaviours and identities. Indeed, some of these investigations by writers such as the German sex radical Magnus Hirschfeld emerged from scientific inquiries whose goal was homophile reform.⁷ But the influential

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956).

⁵ Simon Watney, 'The Ideology of GLF', in Gay Left Collective (eds.), *Homosexuality* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980).

⁶ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948); and Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, Paul H. Gebhard, *et al.* (eds.), *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953).

⁷ Hirschfeld's position in the German homophile movements has been traced in James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

classificatory models first devised by theorists like the Austrian sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (who, it should be noted, eventually supported the repeal of Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code that condemned homosexual acts) set an influential trend that led a large proportion of scientists, medical practitioners and lawyers to treat same-sex desire as an intolerable deviation that threatened the moral fabric of society. GLF-inspired research took a defiant stance against those medical frameworks that categorised homosexuality as a perversion. Although GLF-orientated studies not uncommonly met with hostility in universities and colleges (preventing certain noted scholars from advancing their careers), the 1970s and 1980s nevertheless witnessed an immense number of distinguished essays and monographs that analysed such topics as the history of homophile movements in the west, the existence of homosexual subcultures in earlier periods like the Renaissance, and indeed the medical profession's enduring interest in those individuals classified as sexual perverts. By 1993 this body of material had established itself so firmly in disciplines across the humanities and social sciences that a major publisher issued an imposing volume, titled *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, featuring some forty-two essays of considerable critical complexity.⁸

But just at the moment when it appeared that lesbian and gay studies had emerged as an academic field in its own right, a younger generation of activists and thinkers contested what they saw as the complacent and exclusionary politics of this newly legitimated area of inquiry. In 1990 Queer Nation arose from the pro-active campaigning of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). In an act of deliberate provocation, this movement reclaimed the word queer – a term that had frequently been used in the past to shame homosexual men and women. They eagerly resignified the meaning of queerness in the face of what they saw as an inert lesbian and gay politics that commonly refused to admit anyone into its ranks who did not subscribe to an inflexible homosexual politics of identity. In its comparatively brief life span, Queer Nation staged imaginative and confrontational political actions to unite all individuals (not just homosexuals) whose stigmatised desires refused to comply with the normative ideals of heterosexuality. Queer, according to Michael Warner in 1993, posed a challenge to all 'regimes of the normal'⁹ – a normality defined by the very idea that heterosexuality could and should exist as the only form of erotic intimacy.

In the polemical context of queer thought, two sexual constituencies grew increasingly vocal in their criticism of the ways in which many lesbians and gay men had for at least two decades insisted that homosexual political identities

⁸ Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁹ Michael Warner, 'Introduction', in Warner (ed.), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxxvi.

provided a privileged site of resistance to an oppressive heterosexual and patriarchal society. Bisexual people articulated serious dissatisfaction with those lesbians and gay men who believed that anyone who professed to experience both same- and other-sex desires remained complicit with heterosexual oppression. By the late 1980s, bisexual thinkers proposed that lesbian and gay politics remained hamstrung by a limited monosexual approach to human intimacy. From this perspective, bisexual thinkers challenged the presiding belief that human sexuality could be understood in stark binary terms (*either* heterosexual *or* homosexual). Bisexuality, they claimed, confounded any hard-and-fast opposition between same- and other-sex desire. Concurrently, the expansive term transgender began to circulate widely to define individuals who expressed their desires through a broad – though not interchangeable – ensemble of gender-crossing and gender-effacing practices, including such different phenomena as androgyny, transsexuality and transvestism. As the 1990s drew to a close, bisexual theorists and transgender intellectuals had created impressive bodies of research that scrutinised how strict adherence to the paired categories of masculinity and femininity and heterosexuality and homosexuality limited much lesbian and gay thinking when analysing the complex manner in which human beings experienced both gender and eroticism.

Given that critiques of sexuality have diversified so much since Stonewall, it now seems likely that each of the labels listed in the title to this chapter will undergo further transformation – to the point that in the early twenty-first century innovative models for understanding ideas of gender, sex and sexuality may radically modify, if not altogether dispense with, them. In the remainder of this discussion, I explore some of the landmark works of cultural, literary and political criticism that emerged as the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and transgender in turn came to represent significant moments in struggles to liberate dissident sexual communities.

Gay criticism

Dennis Altman's groundbreaking *Homosexual: Liberation and Oppression* (1971) counts among the most zealous critical interventions emerging from the GLF. 'Until very recently', Altman observes, 'homosexuals wrote about themselves in only very personal terms, usually in heavy tones of guilt and self-hatred.'¹⁰ By contrast, he contends that 'human liberation rests on our ability to liberate that part of ourselves, homosexual or heterosexual, that we have repressed. We all need to come out of our particular closets.'¹¹ Altman accordingly devotes his opening chapter to the political urgency of 'coming

¹⁰ Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, rev. edn. (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 9. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

out' in public from the private 'closet' where lesbians and gay men have too often hidden their sexual preference from an antagonistic society. Much of his analysis concentrates on a partly autobiographical account of how 'coming out' involves a psychological and social process from 'the discovery that one is predominantly attracted to others of the same sex' to 'the development of a way of dealing with this'.¹² He maintains, however, that 'coming out' proves immensely difficult when, as he describes it, the limited 'gayworld' available to most male homosexuals comprises a somewhat repressive environment of bars and clubs 'providing a pseudo-community, held together largely by sexual barter'.¹³ To transcend this dispiriting subculture, Altman advocates gay men's participation in a revolutionary movement committed to raising consciousness about the dignity, pride and self-esteem of homosexuals. A major barrier, however, is oppression – especially internalised self-loathing – that prevents male homosexuals from achieving a fulfilling sexual selfhood. Echoing Marcuse, Altman summarises his viewpoint as follows: 'The oppression of homosexuals is part of the general repression of sexuality, and our liberation can only come about as part of a total revolution in social attitudes.'¹⁴ In conclusion, he speculates on how the GLF will bring about the 'end of the homosexual' – in the sense that a politicised gay identity could ensure that 'the homosexual as we know him or her may indeed disappear'.¹⁵ Though written principally from the perspective of a political theorist, *Homosexual* noticeably develops an interdisciplinary analysis – one that would become familiar in subsequent gay criticism – that draws much of its understanding of the pressures exerted on men who desire intimacy with their own sex from a large number of literary sources. (Altman takes the works of writers such as James Baldwin, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, Christopher Isherwood and John Rechy as key points of reference.)

Where the GLF motivated Altman to envision a future of homosexual emancipation, the movement encouraged Jeffrey Weeks to take research on gay liberation in an opposite historical direction. His ambitious project sought to situate the GLF in relation to the various homophile movements that developed in Britain between the 1870s and the 1970s. The resulting study, *Coming Out* (1977), remains a standard work of reference in the history of sexuality. Weeks frames his account of lesbian and gay attempts to secure legal reform by quoting Altman's influential remark that 'to be a homosexual in our society is to be constantly aware that one bears a stigma'.¹⁶ But even if Altman's significant work shows that 'homosexuality is now a subject that is much discussed', Weeks argues that same-sex desire 'is still apparently little understood'. Indeed, he suggests that 'little effort has been made to understand the homosexual consciousness'. *Coming Out* looks mainly at the various small-scale sexual reform movements to establish 'some more general

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 20.¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239.¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

comments about the nature of the changing homosexual situation in Britain over the past hundred years'.¹⁷ He prefaces his discussion, however, with concise accounts of how powerful institutions sought to define, regulate and punish same-sex desire. Like practically every part of his book, Weeks' opening chapters provided a platform upon which other scholars could build more specialised investigations into the proscription of male homosexuality in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Coming Out begins with a survey of the changing legal prohibitions on male same-sex desire, pointing out that although '[l]aw does not create public opinion' it can indeed 'shape and reinforce it'.¹⁸ Weeks carefully traces how the law formally removed the death penalty for buggery in 1861 (though executions for this offence terminated in 1836). Thereafter, his attention turns to the passing of the Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885). This amendment – which remained on the statute book until the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1967 – outlawed acts of 'gross indecency' between males even in private. At the end of three humiliating trials in the spring of 1895, the noted Irish writer Oscar Wilde received the maximum sentence for committing this offence: two years in solitary confinement with hard labour. Weeks discusses how the much-publicised controversy surrounding Wilde's imprisonment formed part of the growing awareness of male homosexuality among influential members of society, notably through the Dublin Castle scandal of 1884 and the Cleveland Street affair of 1889–90. He indicates how and why sexual relations between men drove at the heart of cultural anxieties that arose from a wide range of late-Victorian ideologies, including the social purity crusades, eugenics-orientated debates about 'national efficiency' and the stranglehold that lower middle-class codes of respectability had on attitudes to morality.

Although Weeks' breadth of vision often means that he covers much complex material briefly, *Coming Out* sketches an illuminating picture of how the medical profession often sought to classify and pathologise homosexuality as a form of degenerate perversion. Thereafter, he considers how homosexual subcultures dating from the seventeenth century onward produced definitions of men-loving men. He observes, for example, that Edward Ward's *The Secret History of London Clubs* (1709) 'records the existence of "The Mollies" Club', where a 'curious band of fellows' met in a tavern in the City and held parties and regular gatherings.¹⁹ He notes, too, the development of a subcultural homosexual slang called 'parlare': 'a language for evaluating appearances and mannerisms'.²⁰ Weeks makes it clear, then, that in the face of fierce hostility male homosexuals none the less devised means of communicating socially and sexually with one another, if mainly in urban settings like

¹⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, rev. edn. (London: Quartet, 1990), p. 1. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

London. All of this information elucidates the cultural context in which the earliest generation of homophile reformers embarked on the journey whose ‘ultimate step’ was ‘the acceptance of homosexuality as a “way of life”’.²¹

Weeks’ exploration of the reform movements in Britain then looks in turn at three pioneering figures – John Addington Symonds, Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter – who were among the first to speak out against the British legal ban on male homosexuality. *Coming Out* reveals that the two essays on desire between men written by the critic and poet Symonds for strictly private circulation drew on a variety of discourses to show that male-male eroticism not only had a long and distinguished history but also took a variety of congenital and acquired forms. His comments on Symonds’ *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) disclose how this respected Victorian man of letters devised a deeply scholarly analysis of how and why a particular ethics and moral discipline informed intimacy between men in ancient Greek culture. Likewise, Weeks’ attention to Symonds’ second pamphlet – *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1894) – explains how the author put emergent sexological ideas about homosexual desire under scrutiny. By taking to task a range of influential criminological, medical and psychological researchers (including Cesare Lombroso and Paul Moreau), Symonds supported – though not without criticism – the views that the German homophile campaigner Karl Heinrich Ulrichs put forward on the various kinds of ‘sexual invert’ (whose fundamental type could be characterised as *anima muliebris virile corpore inclusa*: a female soul enclosed in a male body). Further, Weeks reveals how the controversial ‘Calamus’ poems of Walt Whitman inspired a generation of homophile thinkers like Symonds to imagine a modern society in which the American poet’s enthusiasm for ‘comradeship’ took a central role. Carpenter, one of Whitman’s greatest English enthusiasts, combined the Whitmanian model of ‘comrade love’ with his firm belief that homosexual – or, as he preferred to call it, homogenic – attachment formed part of a new evolutionary type that blended masculinity and femininity in new and better ways. In *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), which adapted Ulrichs’ models of ‘inversion’, Carpenter declared: ‘I believe it is true that Uranian [i.e. homogenic or homosexual] men are superior to the normal men . . . in respect of their love-feeling.’²² In the same period as Carpenter theorised the ‘intermediate sex’, Ellis devised his liberal-minded study – one that drew selectively on Symonds’ research – titled *Sexual Inversion* (1897): a sexological work that repudiated the idea that unconventional gender and sexual identities were inferior. Ellis made *Sexual Inversion* the first of seven volumes brought together under the general title *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897–1928) that became some of the most authoritative works of their time.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²² Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*, 4th edn. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916), p. 128.

These studies of Symonds, Carpenter and Ellis provide the basis on which Weeks structures his compendious account of the uneven struggles for sexual reform organised by groups such as the British Society for Sex Psychology, whose pamphlets published from 1914 through the 1920s marked important advances in liberal opinion on same-sex eroticism. He shows how Australian sex educator Norman Haire furthered the aims of these early groups in the late 1940s. Weeks' study concludes with three chapters that investigate the cultural and political circumstances that led to the publication of the Wolfenden Report (1957) whose recommendations for removing the 1885 ban on 'gross indecency' would take another decade to pass into law. This extremely well-documented history culminates in an analysis of the GLF during its heady days of activism during 1970–72. Even though Weeks claimed with some disappointment in 1977 that '[t]he historic wave that GLF seemed to promise has not yet surged forward',²³ he could see from the vantage-point of 1990 – when the second edition of *Coming Out* appeared – 'that the real achievement of the gay liberation movement was to stimulate the growth of the lesbian and gay community'.²⁴ In 1990 he also noted some of the shortcomings of his 1977 study, in particular the small space devoted to lesbian struggles for liberation and his neglect of 'the complex interrelationship between race and sex'.²⁵

Eight years after *Coming Out* attracted wide public attention, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) – an impressive study, based mainly on close readings of nineteenth-century writings, that employed an entirely fresh vocabulary for comprehending the complexities of male-male desire within an apparently heterosexual culture. In the middle of her eloquent book, Sedgwick reveals that her theoretical model owes much to Weeks' formulation that the 'homosexual role' – a term adopted from an innovative 1968 essay by Mary McIntosh²⁶ – 'has two effects: it first helps to provide a clear-cut threshold between permissible and impermissible behaviour; and secondly, it helps to segregate those labelled as "deviants" from others, and thus contains and limits their behaviour pattern'.²⁷ Pursuing this line of inquiry, Sedgwick suggests that the 'homosexual role' belongs to 'the larger category of male homosocial desire' that, in intricate ways, consolidates certain social bonds between men while repudiating sexual contact between them. Describing

²³ Weeks, *Coming Out*, p. 206. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiv. Emily Hamer's research helps to clarify developments in both lesbian consciousness and critical debates about female homosexuality in modern Britain that Weeks omits from his study; see *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians* (London: Cassell, 1996). For a selection of documents that reveal the embedded nature of racial thought in sexological debate, see Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.), *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 201–230.

²⁶ Mary McIntosh, 'The Homosexual Role', *Social Problems* 16 (1968), pp. 182–192.

²⁷ Weeks, *Coming Out*, pp. 3–4.

‘homosocial desire’ as ‘a kind of oxymoron’, she says that this – her own distinctive invention – indicates ‘the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted’.²⁸ Sedgwick emphasises that her model of a ‘continuum’ rebuts the idea that homoeroticism lies “‘at the root of” other forms of male homosociality’.²⁹ Instead, her analysis focuses on how western cultures endorse a patriarchal imperative that often encourages men to work in the social interests of other men by subordinating women.

In Sedgwick’s view, such homosocial bonding occurs most recognisably in the research of structural anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss who in the mid-twentieth century investigated the exchange of women through marriage. Drawing on René Girard’s famous exploration of ‘erotic triangles’ in ‘the male-centered novelistic tradition of European high culture’, Sedgwick suggests that his inquiries show that, even when ‘two males are rivals for a female’, it is ‘the bond between males that he assiduously uncovers’.³⁰ In her view, such analyses reveal that the ensuing rivalry creates tense forms of ‘emulation and identification’ between the male suitors – in a variety of sexual and non-sexual manifestations. The upshot of this analysis is to expose how and why male homosocial bonding remains inextricable from types of eroticism that western societies seek to banish through homophobia. In sum, Sedgwick’s resourceful theoretical model indicates that the phobic, sexual and social elements structuring relations between men bear a precarious relation to one another.

Lesbian criticism

Lesbian-affirmative critical enquiries into female homosexuality pre-date GLF by more than a decade. In 1956 Jeannette H. Foster – who worked as librarian of the Kinsey Institute from 1948 to 1952 – published *Sex-Variant Women in Literature*, the result of twenty-one years of research whose remarkable bibliographical scope has ensured that the study remains an indispensable resource. Even though the pre-GLF era witnessed important advances in understandings of lesbianism, through community journals such as *The Ladder* (in the United States) and *Sappho* (in the United Kingdom), Foster’s immensely scholarly book was the first to show that women classified as ‘sex-variant’ – a term ‘not as yet rigidly defined nor charged with controversial overtones’³¹ – maintained an enduring presence in countless literary

²⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 1–2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21. Sedgwick’s analysis refers to René Girard’s chapter, ‘Triangular Desire’, in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), pp. 1–52.

³¹ Jeannette H. Foster, *Sex-Variant Women in Literature*, 3rd edn. (Tallahassee: Naiad Press 1985), p. 11.

writings, all the way from Sappho to Jean-Paul Sartre. Owing to her exceptionally wide reading, Foster's discussion enables readers to see developments in understandings of lesbianism across a number of European and American literary traditions, often advancing views either ignored or dismissed in the literary criticism of her contemporaries. In her detailed chapter titled 'From the Romantics to the Moderns', for example, Foster traces a pattern of female homeroticism linking Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Christabel' (1816) with Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862); she boldly claims that the latter 'is generally regarded as variant or even lesbian',³² a point anticipating feminist analyses of the 1970s. Although Foster often remains cautious in categorising any woman writer as definitively lesbian, midway through her book she offers a thoughtful 'Conjectural Retrospect' on authors whose lives 'most readily yield suggestive hints' and whose works 'correlate such hints with corresponding traces' that may further our knowledge of their same-sex desires.³³ Included in this section are Charlotte Charke, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby ('The Ladies of Llangollen'), George Sand, Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) and Emily Dickinson, all of whom have been the focus of detailed lesbian criticism produced since the time of the GLF and the WLM.

The increasingly liberated climate of the 1960s certainly saw the publication of sympathetic accounts of lesbian desire, such as Vera Brittain's important study of the trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, for obscene libel in 1928.³⁴ But it was not until the advent of the GLF and the WLM before critics devised positive celebrations of lesbian identity, community and creativity. Among the books that presented an unapologetic viewpoint on the need for lesbian liberation is Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's *Sappho was a Right-On Woman* (1972). Opening with a survey of widespread social hostility to female homosexuality and the resulting feelings of guilt and shame among many lesbians, they maintain that '[l]ike the schizophrenic, the Lesbian creates a false self . . . which she interposes between herself and the world'.³⁵ They contend that lesbians produce a 'false self' not only because of the daily need to keep their desires in the closet but also because of what they see as the distinct limitations to the lesbian subculture that has developed in many western cities. In particular, they express discontent with the types of butch and femme sexual identities that lesbians adopt in the bar scene. Such role-playing, according to Abbott and Love, means that 'the Lesbian will find it hard to be herself, to know who she is'.³⁶

In the following year, Jill Johnston's energetic *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (1973) made equally forthright claims about the gendered

³² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁴ Vera Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* (London: Femina, 1968).

³⁵ Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

styles developed in lesbian subcultures: 'The butch or diesel dyke is a stylistic imitation of the male whose structures she thought she had to transpose in relation to herself to obtain gratification. Likewise the femme.'³⁷ But in stressing impatience with what she witnessed as a depressing lesbian mimicry of heterosexual norms, she took her analysis a step further to declare that other-sex desires underwrote the oppression of all women:

The man retains the prime organ of invasion. Sexual congress between man and woman is an invasion of the woman, the woman doesn't get anything up to participate in this congress, and although a woman may be conditioned to believe that she enjoys this invasion and may in fact grow to like it if her male partner makes rare sacrifices of consideration in technical know-how, she remains the passive receptive hopeful half of a situation that is unequal from the start.³⁸

Johnston's belief that heterosexual intercourse violated women's bodies because it represented the structural inequality between the sexes would be developed in many areas of radical feminist debate, particularly the critiques of rape and pornography produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s by such writers as Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin and Robin Morgan.³⁹ Further, Johnston's firm belief that love between women remained the only form of resistance to oppressive heterosexuality led to the formation of political lesbianism: a type of sexual separatism that by the mid-1970s often claimed to stand at the vanguard of feminism. In her memorable study, Johnston asks her readers to entertain a number of possible alternatives to heterosexuality for women. Does the answer, she asks rhetorically, lie in the test-tube baby that would release women from the reproductive function? From her perspective, the answer is no because women must look to other women – not the male medical profession – to achieve autonomy from patriarchy. 'Lesbianism', she contends, 'is the solution'; this is, she adds, 'another way of putting what Ti-Grace Atkinson once described as Feminism being a theory and Lesbianism the practice. When theory and practice come together we'll have a revolution. Until all women are lesbians there will be no political revolution.'⁴⁰

The rise of lesbian-feminism during the 1970s provided a hospitable context in which Lillian Faderman could research her historically wide-ranging volume, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981). Covering some of the same ground as Foster's book, Faderman's highly regarded work adopted the

³⁷ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 176. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 165–166.

³⁹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975); Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981); and Robin Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape' (1974), *Words of a Woman: Feminist Dispatches, 1968–1992* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 78–89.

⁴⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, p. 166. For a detailed account of the rise of political lesbianism within the WLM in the United States, see Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 210–241.

concept of ‘romantic friendship’ – originally an eighteenth-century term that ‘signified a relationship that was noble and virtuous in every way’⁴¹ – from an earlier study by Elizabeth Mavor that explored the lives of Butler and Ponsonby, who in 1780 eloped from their wealthy Irish families and settled at Llangollen in north Wales.⁴² In Faderman’s view, ‘romantic friendship’ characterised close bonds of attachment that were not always – indeed rarely – eroticised through genital contact. Noting ‘the lack of overt sexual expression’ in the voluminous writings that she explores, Faderman concludes that ‘it is likely that most love relationships between women during previous eras, when females were encouraged to force any sexual drive they might have to remain latent, were less physical than they are in our times’.⁴³ In the case of Butler and Ponsonby, for example, Faderman observes that ‘even had there been a sexual relationship between them, it is doubtful they would have committed a discussion of it to paper’.⁴⁴

Later critics would certainly call into question Faderman’s hypothesis about the largely non-erotic but intensely romantic character of love between women who lived before the nineteenth century. In one of the most informed studies of lesbianism in the period from which the term ‘romantic friendship’ derives, Emma Donoghue remarks that this concept – if historically grounded – has fairly limited uses. Writing in 1993, Donoghue admits that ‘Faderman’s theory is a useful rebuttal of the mid-twentieth-century assumption that passion between women has always been a matter of a small, sick or sinful minority’.⁴⁵ Likewise, she believes that ‘Faderman’s thesis still helps us to make sense of the many early texts which present female friendship, even its jealousies and embraces, as sexless and innocent.’ But from Donoghue’s perspective, ‘romantic friendship’ – with its tendency to desexualise passionate attachments – ‘fails to address’ such phenomena as ‘texts about “tribades” and “Sapphists” masquerading as romantic friends, or texts in which sex between women takes place in a context of female social friendship’. Moreover, ‘Faderman’s argument that women were only suspected of sexual deviance if, as transvestites, for instance, they were seen to be usurping a male prerogative, does not explain why some women who passed as men were given royal pensions, while some romantic friends were attacked in print’.⁴⁶ Instead of making any overarching claim about the diverse materials that she covers in her own book, Donoghue openly declares: ‘I have found no simple answer to the question of whether women who loved women were socially acceptable.’⁴⁷ In many ways, where Faderman sought to contain passion

⁴¹ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), p. 16.

⁴² Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study of Romantic Friendship* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971). ⁴³ Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁵ Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668–1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), p. 19. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

between women within a non-erotic identity, Donoghue focuses on how female homosexuality took many different – indeed, uneven and contradictory – forms.

The increasing attention to differences among lesbians became visible in a range of radical writings of the 1980s. Joan Nestle, for example, articulated strong criticisms of lesbian feminists who condemned butch-femme relationships. Looking back on her participation in the lesbian bar culture of the 1950s, Nestle offers this viewpoint: ‘butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply Lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, loving, courage and autonomy.’⁴⁸ In the same decade as Nestle rethought the ‘sexual courage’ among women-loving women before the advent of the WLM, the voices of sadomasochist (SM) activists posed a challenge to lesbian-feminist disdain for any forms of eroticism involved with seemingly unequal power roles. In 1981, Gayle Rubin asserted that, ‘[g]iven prevailing ideas of appropriate feminist behavior, S/M appears to be the mirror opposite. It is dark and polarized, extreme and ritualized, and above all, it celebrates difference and power.’⁴⁹ In Rubin’s opinion, the emergence of a visible lesbian SM subculture meant that ‘sex – not just gender, not just homosexuality – has finally been posed as a political question’.⁵⁰ Anticipating by almost a decade issues that would become central to queer theory, Rubin declares that ‘[t]he sexual outlaws – boy-lovers, sadomasochists, prostitutes, trans-people – have an acute perception of the sexual hierarchies in society and how they work’.⁵¹

During this era, lesbian theorists of colour concentrated on questions of ethnic and racial difference to refocus how intellectuals considered sexual hierarchies. The African-American poet Audre Lorde emerged as one of the most articulate voices addressing what she witnessed as the biases of class, race and sexuality embedded in academic feminism. In her well-known speech titled ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, delivered at the ‘Second Sex Conference’ at New York City in 1979, Lorde put the spotlight on ‘the academic arrogance’ that could ‘assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and Lesbians’.⁵² Acutely aware of her marginal status at this event, Lorde remarked: ‘I stand here as a Black Lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented.’

⁴⁸ Joan Nestle, ‘Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s’, *A Restricted Country: Essays and Short Stories* (London: Sheba, 1988), p. 100.

⁴⁹ Gayle Rubin, ‘The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M’, in SAMOIS (ed.), *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics in Lesbian S/M* (Berkeley: SAMOIS, 1981), p. 213.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Audre Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 110.

Ten years after Lorde contended that feminists should respect difference by taking a more inclusive approach to the diverse economic, ethnic and geopolitical identities of women, the Chicana lesbian writer Gloria Anzaldúa discussed the work of Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos to propose a way of thinking about the differences that exist within what she calls '*mestiza*' subjectivity. Inhabiting a linguistic, social and political border zone between Mexico and the United States, the idea of *la mestiza* advances a theory of inclusiveness that results from 'the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another'. In other words, *la mestiza* emerges from the interweaving of different cultures, languages and political environments, a process that necessarily involves certain contradictions, tensions and paradoxes. This is how Anzaldúa presents her *mestiza* predicament:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and the planet.⁵³

Excluded in some contexts yet integrated in others, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness offered a powerful model for thinking about the internal instabilities – as well as the transformational potential – of human subjectivity. Her style of thinking would at points coincide with theoretical debates within bisexual, queer and transgender criticism that began to proliferate in the 1990s.

Bisexual, queer and transgender criticism

Attending to questions of difference within and between sexual identity-formations, the divergent fields of bisexual, queer and transgender criticism in many respects extended and refined the points raised by such thinkers as Nestle, Rubin and Anzaldúa. In a roundtable discussion on bisexuality held in the mid-1990s, Ann Kaloski remarked: 'Like many of us, when I first started to theorize bisexuality there was very little around that related to how I experienced or thought about my sexuality.'⁵⁴ But readings in areas of French fem-

⁵³ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness', in Alma M. García (ed.), *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Anzaldúa develops her model *mestiza* consciousness from José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza Ibero-Americana* (Mexico: Aguilar S.A. de Ediciones, 1961).

⁵⁴ Ann Kaloski, 'Editors' Roundtable Discussion: The Bisexual Imaginary', in BI ACADEMIC INTERVENTION (ed.), *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity and Desire* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 204.

inist and postmodern feminism, if not directly addressed to bisexuality, enabled Kaloski to imagine ‘ways of thinking about the self as a hotch-potch of processes and understandings’. ‘I found’, she added, ‘Anzaldúa’s work particularly useful as her thinking is focused around a hybridity which has “real” material consequences.’ Kaloski’s explorations of female bisexuality certainly stand at considerable distance from Johnston’s contention made in 1972: ‘Bisexuality for women in the revolution in any case is collaboration with the enemy.’⁵⁵ While Kaloski began to seek out theoretical models to conceptualise bisexual desire, experience and identity, Merl Storr contested one of the precepts informing lesbian and gay histories of sexuality – namely, the view ‘that sexuality is regulated by a binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality which was either inaugurated or consolidated by . . . sexologists’ such as Krafft-Ebing and Ellis in relation to such concepts as inversion.⁵⁶ Storr maintained that homosexual critical frameworks mistakenly occlude ‘bisexuality both as a historical – indeed, historiographical – concern and as a contemporary issue’.

Like much bisexual thought, queer theory emerged from a sense of considerable unease with the ways in which the GLF and the WLM often claimed that the only alternative to heterosexuality was its polar opposite: homosexuality. Much queer research absorbed the cardinal points made in the introductory volume of French thinker Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976) – translated into English in 1978 – that theorised the complex relays of power emerging at the moment when the sexual category *homosexual* produced the idea of ‘a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology’.⁵⁷ In a study contemporaneous with the rise of queer thought, Sedgwick remarks that she takes as ‘axiomatic’ Foucault’s view of how ‘modern Western culture has what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge’.⁵⁸ Foucault suggested that, prior to the time that sexology classified persons according to object-choice, societies generally understood same-sex intimacy in relation to acts and behaviours. Such a being was defined ‘less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexuality or sensibility’, thus making the ‘homosexual’ an identifiable ‘species’.⁵⁹ His introductory essay on the history of sexuality proposes a theory of how discursive regimes have consolidated what his followers would later call identitarian understandings of sexuality. Focusing on the

⁵⁵ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, pp. 179–180.

⁵⁶ Merl Storr, ‘The Sexual Reproduction of “Race”: Bisexuality, History and Racialization’, in BI ACADEMIC INTERVENTION, *The Bisexual Imaginary*, p. 74.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979), p. 43.

⁵⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 5. ⁵⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 43.

social power exerted by the ways in which institutions created sexual identities through particular taxonomies, Foucault's singular critical approach had a strong impact on the work of several thinkers who became associated with the reconceptualisation of the term queer and its anti-essentialist mode of inquiry.

Drawing on different strands of poststructuralist thinking (including Derridean grammatology and Lacanian psychoanalysis), Judith Butler advanced an ambitious view of how western societies produced and perpetuated ideas of gender, sex and sexuality. Her mainly philosophical exploration frequently integrated Foucauldian insights into her analysis of the ways in which modern culture tended to use sexual categories as if they were natural, rather than socially constructed. She pointed out, for example, that an 'identity-sign' such as lesbian possessed no essential content but remained instead a signifier that operated within a field of contestatory representation. In an essay dating from 1991, Butler explained how the idea that she might go to a conference to 'be a lesbian' may at first sound frivolous but in fact involved forms of signification play that, in complex ways, constituted what 'being lesbian' might mean:

To say that I 'play' at being one [a lesbian] is not to say that I am not one 'really'; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that 'being' gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed. This is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, and this 'I does not play its lesbianism as a role. Rather, it is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian 'I'; paradoxically, it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes.⁶⁰

Instead of assuming that a lesbian essence must strive to come out publicly intact, Butler argued that the *performance* of that sexual identity must, through contextually variable structures of repetition, seek to constitute what it means to be lesbian. Like poststructuralist thinkers following the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Butler stated that there is no *a priori* bond between a word and its meaning. For this reason, she proved highly responsive to French writer Monique Wittig's attention to the ways in which key components of discourse produced the ideological belief that other-sex desire remains utterly natural. In one of her brief but incisive essays from the 1980s, Wittig stated: 'The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual . . . The category of sex is the one that rules as "natural" the relation that is at the base of (heterosexual) society and through which half of the population, women, are "heterosexualized" . . . and submitted to a heterosexual economy.'⁶¹ Concurring with Simone de Beauvoir's famous remark – 'One is

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 18.

⁶¹ Monique Wittig, 'The Category of Sex', *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 5.

not born but becomes a woman' – Wittig proclaimed that 'Lesbian is the only concept I know which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.'⁶² In many ways, Wittig put greater pressure than any other theorist on the idea that discourse creates 'sex'. Her viewpoint certainly coincided with the tenor of Butler's contention that 'compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of "man" and "woman", are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real'.⁶³ Together, Butler's and Wittig's lines of thinking prompted intellectuals to consider in greater depth how sexual identities emerged from sometimes unpredictable processes involving many different types of representation – linguistic, somatic, visual.

The queer emphasis on representational play, discursive construction, and differential instability contributed to debates about postmodernism: a large field of inquiry that preoccupied theorists during the 1980s. More than a decade later, an incipient transgender studies interrogated some of the commonplace postmodern axioms of queer thought abstracted from writings such as Butler's that advanced the view that the body existed as a somatic surface upon which meanings of gender remained in a state of signifiatory ambivalence. In 1998 Jay Prosser's sustained and thought-provoking transgender analysis of queer-orientated research opened by questioning the terms on which Butler derived influential ideas such as 'gender performance': the concept most commonly associated with Butler's acclaimed study, *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to Butler, 'gender performance' involved the representational production of gender upon a bodily surface. In other words, this structure of gendered representation could be seen as a metaphorical type of theatrical performance. To clarify the performative structure of gender, Butler concluded her 1990 study by drawing on the example of gay male drag; she declared: '[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency'.⁶⁴ Her memorable formulation, which noticeably featured a cross-gendered practice, suggested that gender always remained within a domain of performative irresolution that defied any notion of authenticity. Prosser's valuable critique of Butler's work argued that various forms of transsexual experience present 'the limit case for queer studies', since transsexuality demands attention, not to performative play, but to precisely those kinds of bodily 'literality and referentiality' that queer thinking has sought to expose as essentialist and thus conceptually naive.⁶⁵

⁶² Wittig, 'One Is Not Born a Woman', *The Straight Mind*, p. 20; Wittig is quoting Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 295.

⁶³ Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', p. 21.

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 137.

⁶⁵ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 58.

Prosser's research encouraged critics to respect that living in the 'wrong body' – an experience that can motivate transgender people to progress first to hormone therapy and then to surgical reassignment to the other sex – required a revised understanding of how Freud developed his theory of 'bodily ego' in 'The Ego and the Id' (1923). Taking his cue from psychoanalytic theorists such as Didier Anzieu, Prosser insisted that the skin remains 'a psychic/somatic interface': 'a locale for the physical experience of body image and surface upon which is projected the psychic representation of the body'.⁶⁶ Such reasoning contrasted sharply with the kind of gender 'literality' that lesbian-feminist critic Janice G. Raymond advanced in *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), where she stated that 'a society that produces sex-role stereotyping functions as a primary cause of transsexualism'. From Raymond's perspective, transsexuality resulted from a limited understanding of the supposed sexual antithesis of masculinity and femininity. As a consequence, she asserted that the desire to transition from one sex to another can only reinforce 'the fabric by which a sexist society is held together'.⁶⁷ Raymond thus concluded that in no respect could transsexuality be understood as a subversion of gender categories. Prosser's supple argumentation indicated that sexual identity was neither a form of natal embodiment central to much lesbian-feminist thought of the 1970s nor a type of signifiatory imitation celebrated by queer theory of the early 1990s. Further, he pointed out that historians of sexuality have often been misguided in assuming that sexological concepts such as inversion were largely or exclusively connected with homosexuality when in fact they may be more accurately understood within a transgender framework. Building on Prosser's valuable historical and theoretical intervention, transgender studies will doubtless continue to further our reassessment of the insights that have advanced the critical vision of each phase of gay, lesbian and queer criticism that I have outlined here.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72. Prosser's inquiries into the Freudian 'bodily ego' are informed by Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Self*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁶⁷ Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (London: Women's Press, 1980), pp. xviii–xix.