

“These Girlish Devotions”:  
Women’s Colleges, the Evolution of Romantic Friendships,  
and the Development of a Lesbian Identity (1890-1939)

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May 5, 2016

A senior thesis, submitted to the History Department of Brandeis University,  
in partial fulfillment of the Bachelor of Arts degree and Honors Program.

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## Introduction

Mary “Molly” Dewson (1874-1962) grew up in an affluent family in Quincy, Massachusetts. She was raised by Edward Henry Dewson and Elizabeth Weld Dewson as the youngest of six children. Dewson attended private school, received her degree from Wellesley College in 1897, and quickly became a prominent reformer and political figure. She was secretary of the Domestic Reform Committee of the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union, the superintendent of parole at the Massachusetts State Industrial School for Girls, an active member in the women’s suffrage movement, and was eventually appointed head of the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee.<sup>1</sup> At the height of her career on the Democratic National Committee, she was in command of 80,000 women, quickly gaining nicknames like “Queen Molly,” “The General,” and “More Women Dewson.”<sup>2</sup> Dewson however, not only embodied a new vanguard of female activism, but also represented a generation of women who engaged in intense, romantic, and long-term relationships with other women. For over 50 years, she was engrossed in a longtime “partnership” with her female friend Mary “Polly” Porter (1884-1972).

“Molly and Polly” met each other at the Boston School for Social Workers in 1910. Dewson was 36 years old, working as the superintendent of parole, and Porter was 26, studying to become a social worker. The two women became “fast friends” and were soon described as “inseparable.”<sup>3</sup> Porter was quickly integrated into Dewson’s family and openly approved of by Dewson’s mother.<sup>4</sup> In 1912, Dewson and Porter bought a house together in South Berlin, Massachusetts, but after residing in Greenwich Village, New York, the couple retired to Castine,

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<sup>1</sup> See Molly Dewson Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics*, (New Haven, 1989), xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

<sup>4</sup> Ware, *Partner and I*, 51.

Maine. The two women ultimately lived together in “complete companionship” until Dewson’s death in 1962.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, there is little remaining correspondence between the two women, partly because they spent most of their lives in each other’s company. Nevertheless, there is other evidence of the intensity and passionate bond of their relationship. For example, Dewson and Porter devoted most of their free time to socializing together, attending theatrical and musical productions, visiting art museums, and planning outings to the opera and symphony. After 1912, Dewson shaped her professional career around her relationship with Porter. Dewson only undertook work that would allow her to spend summers with Porter and maintain their lifestyle together during the rest of the year in Greenwich Village.<sup>6</sup> There were also various jointly signed letters, a library of books stamped “Porter-Dewson,” a shared bedroom, hundreds of photographs, pet names like “Puisye,” “Auntie Whitewash,” and “Partner and I,” and candid yet accepting accounts by both friends and family members.<sup>7</sup>

Dewson and Porter’s relationship is not uncharacteristic of same-sex relationships between women before World War II. Many women from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century engaged in long-term relationships with other women. Like Dewson and Porter, most of these women grew up in affluent backgrounds, attended institutions of higher learning, actively engaged in political and social reform movements, lived in metropolitan areas like Greenwich Village, and immersed themselves in female homosocial environments, even if they were married to men.

Many assume that open same-sex female relationships were not widely accepted until after World War II with the sexual revolution, women’s movement, and gay liberation of the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Ware, *Partner and I*, xv-xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 51-52, 59-60.

1960s and 1970s. Dewson and Porter's public long-term partnership however, attests that this assumption obscures a more interesting and nuanced story. Thousands of women were involved in romantic and sexual relationships with other women before any of these movements took place. These relationships however, did not exist in a vacuum. Women like Dewson and Porter and their relationships with one another were intricately linked to the establishment of women's colleges, changing discourses of sexuality, and the gradual development of lesbianism as a sexual identity.

Most scholars studying the history of lesbianism have either chosen to focus on the period after World War II, or have investigated the emerging lesbian community through the lens of social rather than political or cultural history. Lesbian historian Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* delves into the topic in this manner. Her book serves as a solid foundation for the evolution of the lesbian community and lesbianism during the pre-World War II period, though where she lacks, is the ways in which this community interacted specifically with cultural and political institutions. This is the space I intend my research to fill.

Other scholars have investigated the intersections between sexual, political, and legal history, but have decided to focus mainly on male homosexuality. Both Margot Canaday's *The Straight State*, and George Chauncey's *Gay New York* have engaged in this exercise. My research will use Canaday and Chauncey's approaches, but will focus solely on the lesbian community. In this way, my thesis will be a cultural history integrating the experiences of specific women with broader social, sexological, and political discourses and trends. My research will therefore be unique because it will combine discussions of cultural, political, and institutional changes during the first half of the twentieth century with primary and secondary

source research on female “romantic friendships,” the emergence of lesbianism, and the budding lesbian community.

This thesis tracks the evolution of romantic female friendships from the Progressive Era to the development of a lesbian identity by World War II. It further investigates the ways in which women’s colleges and changing discourses of sexuality contributed to the formation of female friendships and a nascent lesbian identity. My research will ultimately answer the following questions:

- 1) How did same-sex female relationships evolve from the 1890 to 1939? How have ideas of women loving women and lesbianism changed during this period?
- 2) Were there specific societal structures like women’s colleges or social discourses that facilitated or hindered the development of same-sex female relationships?
- 3) How did specific societal structures, like women’s colleges or changing social discourses, help shape the concepts of “female romantic friendships,” “female sexual inversion” and “lesbianism?”

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each covering a period of roughly a decade. The first chapter explores romantic female friendships and their relation to the emergence of both Progressive reform movements and women’s colleges from 1890 to the turn of the century. The second chapter investigates the development of medical discourses on sexuality and how these new discussions impacted same-sex female relationships during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The third chapter examines the convergence of bohemian sexuality and an early gay subculture in the 1920s with an expanding sexological concern of same-sex female relationships. Finally, the fourth chapter considers the ways in which a growing psychological approach to sexology and popular interest in lesbianism affected the public understanding and status of relationships between women.

When delving into the history of sexuality it is necessary to bear in mind that “lesbianism” is a modern label and identity. What we consider as “lesbian” today did not exist in the same way in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The term lesbian did not enter the mainstream vernacular until after World War II. In the period I am covering, the most commonly used terms were “female invert,” “female pervert,” and “sexual deviant,” all of which were coined by the medical establishment but eventually took on popular connotations.

Similarly, not all “romantic friendships,” which were first studied in depth by historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, fit our contemporary definitions of lesbian relationships. Like all relationships, they were conditioned by the norms and values of their time. Some romantic friendships were sexual in nature, while others were not. Some romantic friendships were more romantic than others. It is important to place each friendship in historical context because every one of these relationships and every woman involved were different. In order to avoid these broad generalizations, when I am discussing women that we would label as lesbians today, I will either be using the contemporary terms of the period like “romantic friends” or “female invert,” or, in Faderman’s words, “women who love women.”

My research in no way represents all women who loved women from the Progressive Era to World War II. Because I was looking through the lens of women’s colleges, my research is inherently limited to women of a specific class and race. As a result, my research centers on mostly white middle to upper class women. Working class women and women of color engaged in same-sex relationships throughout the period covered by this thesis, but information about these women is much harder to unearth. Moreover, while women’s colleges were not always inclusive, they do offer us useful insights into a group of young, intelligent women who

contributed to the intellectual vibrancy of their times, and both reflected and reevaluated the norms of an important historical moment.

Similarly, because my research focuses on primary sources, it is also fundamentally limited in its scope. The most difficult aspect of documenting the lives and experiences of women who loved women is the lack of sources. Many of these women were understandably reluctant to document their love lives, and those who did were often forced to destroy or at least suppress their stories. Consequently, the sources to which we do have access represent a specific and fortunate part of the population. These women were mostly wealthy, had the resources (and confidence) to write and save such documents, and possessed enough clout or prominence that their documents could later be preserved in archives. Nevertheless, the sources that are available, which range from personal letters to journals to diaries, reveal a captivating and untold history of women and their relationships that have shaped our contemporary discourses of sexuality, love, and friendship.

**Chapter 1**  
**“My Dear Beautiful Sweetheart”:**  
**Women who Loved Women in the Early Progressive Era**

*“When your heart goes pitter-patter  
 Just to meet Her on the stairs,  
 When She smiles upon you kindly  
 Tho to speak you do not dare  
 When you jealously, when you jealously  
 Look upon a rival claim  
 That's a crush, that's a crush,  
 Yes, that's a crush”*

– Barnard College “Crush Chorus,” Stella Bloch Scrapbook, Barnard College Archives, (1911)

From the late nineteenth century to the turn of the century, intimate friendships between women were not only accepted but revered. The emergence and popularity of reform movements allowed middle and upper class women to meet one another and collaborate for common causes. Similarly, the expansion of educational and work prospects for women offered new levels of autonomy and the opportunity to develop female friendships and solidarity. Close female bonds were an essential part of the conventional path to womanhood and the women’s college experience. Within this context, relationships between women who loved women flourished and were for the most part unquestioned. Many women who loved women in fact were able to live with one another and engage in lifelong relationships.

In the 1890s social welfare moved to the forefront of socio-political discourse. New levels of industrialization, the expansion of slums across urban areas, the flood of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and increasing conflict over labor invigorated the middle and upper classes, inspiring them to join various reform movements. As historian Michael Willrich argues, the Progressive Era was characterized by a pervading sense of collective solidarity,



“inescapable interdependence” and desire for civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> As a result, during this period, men and women joined reform and public welfare movements in unprecedented numbers. According to Daniel Rogers, these movements were centered on a series of three separate but interlocking discourses: anti-monopolism, social bonding, and social efficiency.<sup>2</sup> These three discourses together formed a pervasive rhetoric of social cohesion, interdependence, and shared responsibility that dominated the motivations of Progressive-minded individuals and the reform efforts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

For women involved in the Progressive reform movements, temperance, labor, and social welfare became focal points. These concerns manifested themselves in various organizations such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the Settlement House Movement, the Young Women’s Christian Association, the National Consumers League, and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs among many others.<sup>4</sup> All of these organizations were designed to address the growing ills of urban society and the dastardly conditions of American factories. Many of these middle and upper class educated women also joined the suffrage movement, if they had not done so already. The National American Women Suffrage Association in 1890 emerged as the largest suffrage organization in the country.<sup>5</sup> Even though participation in NAWSA and the suffrage movement dwindled during the 1890s, after the turn of the century, involvement began to rise, with memberships reaching a record high in 1915.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the Progressive Era reform

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Willrich, *Pox: An American History*, (New York, 2011), 168; Michael Willrich, *City of Courts: Socializing Justice in Progressive Era Chicago*, (Cambridge, 2003), xxxviii.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel T. Rogers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History*, *The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects*, (Dec., 1982), 123.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Miriam Cohen, “Women and the Progressive Movement,” *History Now*, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, “Women and the Progressive Movement.”

movements from temperance to labor to suffrage provided women with unprecedented opportunity to interact and collaborate with one another for a common goal.

The late nineteenth century also witnessed a surge in women's higher education.<sup>7</sup> While approximately 50 women's colleges were founded between 1836 and 1875, these schools varied in quality and resources, and lacked in comparison to men's colleges.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of Vassar in 1865 however, signified a new and improved era for women's education. Between 1870 and 1900 the numbers of women enrolled in institutions of higher learning skyrocketed from 11,000 to 85,000.<sup>9</sup> Vassar was the first women's college to implement stringent admissions standards and academic programs that rivaled men's institutions. The other "Seven Sisters" colleges, Barnard, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Radcliffe, followed Vassar's example. These seven colleges, founded over the course of 24 years, paralleled the education and elitism of the men's Ivy League schools. Likewise, most of the faculty at these institutions was made up of women and most of their Presidents were women as well.<sup>10</sup> The "Seven Sisters" colleges and women's higher education in general, facilitated the growing independence, intelligence, and solidarity among middle and upper class women. Higher education offered the opportunity to bring large groups of women together and create new careers founded in social work like the settlement house and labors movements.

Thanks to the expansion of women's colleges, the growth of the feminist and suffrage movements, and the increasing number of work opportunities in reform movements, by the beginning of the twentieth century, women were more independent than they ever had been. For

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<sup>7</sup> See Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education*, (New Haven, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Irene Harwarth, Elizabeth DeBra, and Mindi Maline, *Women's Colleges in the United States: History Issues, and Challenges*, (Ann Arbor, 1997), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Harwarth, DeBra, and Maline, *Women's Colleges*, 6.

the first time in American history, because of these social and economic factors, large numbers of women could live their lives with other women instead of relying solely on men. This autonomy however, really only existed for white middle and upper-middle class women. Poor, working class women, and women of color had few significant opportunities for independence. Therefore, long-term same-sex relationships were the most feasible among the middle and upper classes.<sup>11</sup> Many women ended up sharing same-sex households with fellow college graduates, nicknamed “Boston marriages” because they were so common in the Northeast.<sup>12</sup>

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was characterized by a phenomenon among women dubbed “female friendships.” Historian Judith Schwarz described the women within these friendships as “close friends and devoted companions.”<sup>13</sup> According to lesbian historian Lillian Faderman in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* however, “whether or not their relationships were specifically sexual” under today’s definition, they would have at least been considered as existing somewhere along what feminist intellectual Adrienne Rich has called the “lesbian continuum.”<sup>14</sup> At one end of the continuum, “lies committed heterosexuality, at the other uncompromising homosexuality; between, a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings.”<sup>15</sup>

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, one of the first historians to delve into the subject of Victorian Era female friendships, defines these friendships as “intense, loving, and openly avowed” beginning “during the women's adolescence and, despite subsequent marriages and geographic separation” and continuing throughout the rest of their lives.<sup>16</sup> These relationships oftentimes had

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York, 1991), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Female World of Love and Ritual,” *Signs*, (Fall, 1975), 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

a sexual aspect. “These bonds were often physical as well as emotional,” Rosenberg argues. “An undeniably romantic and even sensual note frequently marked female relationships.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, some female friendships during this era did have a sexual component, though in no way was sex the defining factor.

A number of societal aspects facilitated and permitted these intense relationships between women to flourish during this period. One of the most important was the gendered segregation of day-to-day life. Under these circumstances, women had little social interaction with men and instead were mainly confined to homosocial environments. Women therefore, spent almost all of their time together, enabling the formation of female solidarity networks and individual relationships. It was not ties between women that were frowned upon, but interaction between women and men that was inhibited. Rosenberg asserts, “These supportive networks were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals which accompanied virtually every important event in a woman's life, from birth to death. Such female relationships were frequently supported and paralleled by severe social restrictions on intimacy between young men and women.”<sup>18</sup> Within this homosocial context of close physical and emotional proximity, “devotion to and love of other women became a plausible and socially accepted form of human interaction.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, these female friendships followed the flow and changes throughout women’s lives. As a result, female friendships were not only accepted, but celebrated as a necessary form of human contact.

Various newspapers and magazines took on the topic of female friendship to promote its benefits for women. One 1846 article described the importance and ideal characteristics of these types of friendships, specifically the need for confidence, sympathy and sincerity. The author advised readers:

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<sup>17</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “Female World of Love and Ritual,” 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “Female World of Love and Ritual,” 9.

You must have confidence enough in your friend to believe that neither slander nor flattery can estrange their affections, and that you are loved as well when absent as present, when in prosperity as in adversity...seek the one whose bosom you would lean with confidence and from whom you would receive sympathy...It will not be enough that your friend profess confidence and appear to sympathize with you, but you must be assured of sincerity, else all is vain.<sup>20</sup>

Authors in this case not only encouraged emotional intimacy between women but deemed it absolutely necessary for proper friendships. In this environment therefore, women could display and share emotional intimacy with female partners without judgment. In fact, they were required to do so.

These passionate female friendships provided a variety of emotional functions for the women within them. One mid-nineteenth-century rural woman in a letter to her daughter discussed this feature of women's friendships, "To have such a friend as thyself to look to and sympathize with her and enter into all her little needs and in whose bosom she could with freedom pour forth her joys and sorrows-such a friend would very much relieve the tedium of many a wearisome hour..."<sup>21</sup> The relationships women formed at school were essential to the creation of women's solidarity networks. According to Rosenberg:

[Girls at school] helped each other overcome homesickness and endure the crises of adolescence. They gossiped about beaux, incorporated each other into their own kinship systems, and attended and gave teas and balls together. Older girls in boarding school 'adopted' younger ones... relations with each other were close, often frolicsome, and surprisingly long lasting and devoted. They wrote secret missives to each other, spent long solitary days with each other, curled up together in bed at night to whisper fantasies and secrets.<sup>22</sup>

These types of emotional practices dominated female friendships. Letter writing, physical closeness, and intense devotion were characteristic of both primary school and college-aged

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<sup>20</sup> "Real Friendship," *Boston Cultivator (1839-1850)*, American Periodicals, (April 18, 1846), 123.

<sup>21</sup> Martha Jefferis to Edith Jefferis, March 15, 1841 qtd in Smith-Rosenberg, "Female World of Love and Ritual," 14.

<sup>22</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, "Female World of Love and Ritual," 19, 21.

relationships between women.

Rosenberg suggests, like Faderman, that academics should view these women's sexual and romantic desires as part of a continuum or spectrum "strongly effected by cultural norms and arrangements" and "influenced in part by observed and thus learned behavior." The nineteenth century was a cultural environment where women had a large degree of freedom in moving across and between this spectrum. The Victorian Era, which many assume was repressive and destructive in terms of sexuality, was in fact quite elastic and open in comparison to that of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

Women's colleges were a prime location for the development of romantic friendships and relationships for women who loved women. This was not only due to their homosocial environments but also because many college rituals served to further encourage intense and passionate relationships between women. For example, women's colleges like Vassar and Smith held all-women dances. *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in a 1901 article entitled "A Girl's College Life" described how older students would act as a kind of suitor for younger students: "She sends her flowers, calls for her, fills her order of dance...takes her to supper, sees her partner home...And if the freshman has made the desired hit, there are dates for future meetings and jollifications."<sup>24</sup> This type of behavior was nicknamed "crushing" or "smashing."

"Crushes" and "smashing" permeated women's colleges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A letter to the *Yale Courant* in 1873 attempted to define the process of smashing for its male readers:

When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straightaway enters upon a regular course of bouquet sendings, interspersed with tinted notes, mysterious packages of 'Ridley's Mixed Candies,' locks of hair

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Lavinia Hart, "A Girl's College Life," *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, (June, 1901), 188-195 qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 20.

perhaps, and many other tender tokens, until at last the object of her attentions is captured, the two become inseparable, and the aggressor is considered by her circle of friends as smashed. The mortality, so to speak, resulting from these smashings is frightening to contemplate. One young lady, the 'Irrepressible,' rejoices in more than thirty. She keeps a list of them, in illuminated text, framed and hung up in her room like a Society poster.<sup>25</sup>

Underclassmen were each paired with upperclassmen in their classes, while newspapers suggested various ways to win the favor of one's crush like sending bouquets or love letters, taking trips together, or attending all-women's dances hosted by the university.

*The Vassar Miscellany*, the college's primary student newspaper, contained various written love poems in honor of Valentine's Day between women. One student from the class of 1891, Juliet Wilbor Tompkins, wrote multiple Valentine's Day poems entitled "Sent Care of Cupid" and "The Same Old Story." Each of these love poems was dedicated to other female students.<sup>26</sup> The latter poem took a whimsical approach, documenting Tompkins' attempt to send Valentines to two female peers simultaneously. In a later 1901 issue of the *Miscellany*, student Mary Danforth Dodge wrote a passionate poem entitled "A Valentine" to another female student named Rose:

Dear Love, 'tis only a rose I send  
 To bear a message true,  
 But if you search in its fragrant depths  
 You'll find my gift for you.  
 No wondrous treasure from isles afar,  
 No gem from the earth's dark core,  
 But into this flower my heart I've breathed,  
 And what can I send you more?  
 Then hold it close, while zephyr sprites  
 Low whisper in their play  
 The greeting my heart would sing, my Rose,

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<sup>25</sup> Letter to *Yale Courant*, reprinted in *The Cornell Times*, March 15, 1873 qtd in Rona Wilk, "What's a Crush? A Study of Crushes and Romantic Friendships at Barnard College, 1900-1920," *OAH Magazine of History*, Sex, Courtship, and Dating, (July, 2004), 20.

<sup>26</sup> "Sent Care of Cupid" and "The Same Old Story," *Vassar Miscellany*, Volume XXIV, Number 5, 1 February 1895, 230, Newspaper Archives, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY.

My Queen, my Life, for aye!<sup>27</sup>

That intensely passionate letters between women like those of Tompkins and Dodge were published annually at Vassar exhibits the culture of tolerance for crushes and female friendship. These women were not judged for their love notes, but instead honored and accepted in the student newspaper.

The phenomenon of crushes and smashing was so widespread that the Barnard College Association of Collegiate Alumni appointed a committee in the 1880s to investigate the practice. Ultimately, however, the committee neglected to mention any reference of the habit in their report on college life. Alice Stone Blackwell, the daughter of feminist Lucy Stone, commented upon the committee's findings, "My theory is that it comes of massing hundreds of nervous young girls together, & shutting them up from the outside world. They are just at the romantic age, they see only each other, & so their sentimentality has no other outlet. The coeducational colleges don't suffer much from 'smashes.'"<sup>28</sup> In many respects, Alice Stone Blackwell was correct. Crushes and smashing dominated women's colleges while they were more or less absent in coed institutions of higher learning.

Because most faculty members at women's colleges were also female, students often developed crushes on their professors. This type of situation occurred with Abby Rankin Holden who was a student at Vassar in the 1870s. In her diary written over the course of her first year from 1871-1872 Holden documented her college experience with classmates, family, and friends daily. The bulk of the diary however, is devoted to her love for her Mental and Moral Philosophy teacher, Miss Lepha N. Clarke. In a December 10 entry, Holden described her passionate

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<sup>27</sup> "A Valentine," *Vassar Miscellany*, Volume XXIX, Number 5, 1 February 1900, 261, Newspaper Archives, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY.

<sup>28</sup> Alice Stone Blackwell to Kitty Barry Blackwell, March 12, 1882, Blackwell Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress qtd in Nancy Sahli, "Smashing: Women's Relationships Before the Fall," *Chrysalis*, (Summer 1979), 22.



feelings for Miss Clarke, explicitly denying that she was just “smashed.” Holden wrote, “Dear Dear [Miss] Clarke, I love her so much, I never loved a lady outside of my relatives, as much as I do her, I would be so happy if she would only love me a little...Emma Clark says that I am ‘smashed’ I ain’t, but I do love and admire her as a teacher and if I only could, as a friend.”<sup>29</sup> Holden was essentially defending her feelings for Miss Clarke, arguing that they were more than just a “smash” but in fact real love. Throughout the later entries, Holden continued to declare her feelings for Miss Clarke, writing about her jealousy of other students and pleading for Miss Clarke’s love in return.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, Holden’s love was ultimately unrequited. In one of her last entries in June, Holden made peace with the fact that her love was not returned in the way she desired:

All my longings and prayers have been in vain she [Miss Clarke] does not love, not bt that she is always lovely [...] kind, so very kind to me, and yet why should she love me when there are so many beautiful and smart girls who are so much more worthy to be loved than I, and yet I don't believe one of them loves her more than I do. She has been a dear friend to me any way, and I think she may love me a little.<sup>31</sup>

Holden’s story is not unique for this time period. Many if not most college women had some type of crush or intense relationship with a peer or faculty member. In many cases, these feelings were temporary and unrequited like Holden. In others, these feelings lead to lifelong relationships between women.

Social reformer Mary Dreier (1875-1963) for instance, never married but shared a home with fellow reformer Frances Kellor (1873-1952) from 1905 until Kellor’s death. Dreier grew up in a wealthy immigrant family in Brooklyn, New York. While growing up, she was privately educated by tutors and she later attended the New York School of Philanthropy. As a reformer,

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<sup>29</sup> December 10 Entry, “Holden, Abby (Rankin). Diary, 1871-1872,” Abby Rankin Holden Diary, Vassar College Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY.

<sup>30</sup> January Entry, “Holden, Abby (Rankin). Diary, 1871-1872,” Abby Rankin Holden Diary.

<sup>31</sup> June Entry, “Holden, Abby (Rankin). Diary, 1871-1872,” Abby Rankin Holden Diary.

Dreier focused mainly on suffrage, women workers, and social welfare. She was President of the New York Women's Trade Union League from 1906-1914, but actively participated in the organization until it disbanded in 1950. Throughout her lifetime she also served on the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, the NYC Board of Education, the New York State Committee on Women in Industry of the Advisory Commission of the Council of National Defense, and chaired the NYC Woman Suffrage Party.

Kellor on the other hand, grew up in Columbus, Ohio. She received a degree in law at Cornell Law School in 1897 and also attended the University of Chicago and the New York Summer School of Philanthropy. Kellor focused her reforming efforts on immigration. She was appointed to various leadership positions on the New York State Immigration Commission, the Bureau of Industries and Immigration of New York State, the North American Civic League for Immigrants, and the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers among others. While living in New York, Kellor also worked closely with Molly Dewson (and her partner Polly Porter), another prominent woman who loved women. Both Dreier and Kellor engaged in reforming work until their respective deaths.

Dreier and Kellor first met in New York, while working against unfair employment practices. Like many women of the Progressive Era, it was their passion for and involvement in various reform movements that brought Dreier and Kellor together. Both women were politically active and dedicated to improving public society, whether that was through social welfare, labor, or immigration reform. The numerous organizations and progressive efforts to which Dreier and Kellor devoted their lives provided an environment where their romantic relationship could not only develop but flourish.

The two women engaged in a lengthy correspondence that lasted the span of their lifelong relationship. Even though the two women lived together for the majority of their lives, both of them traveled often for their respective reforming efforts. During their relationship, Dreier and Kellor developed codenames for one another in their letters. Mary was “Six” or “Sixy” and Frances was “Seven” or “7.” The fact that the two developed a code connotes a sense of eroticism and need for secrecy in their relationship.

Many of the letters between the two women involved intricate declarations of love. In an undated letter to Dreier, Kellor wrote, “My own dear beautiful sweetheart...My heart is full of love and longing to gather you up...and tell you how wonderfully beautiful you have been in all these months...Dear dear heart I love you even more tenderly than in those beautiful days when I first found you.”<sup>32</sup> The women often used pet names to address one another like “my dear sweetheart” or “little sweetheart” and signed their letters “your darling,” “close and intimate friend,” and “dear dear dear love.”<sup>33</sup> Some of the letters between Dreier and Kellor were explicitly sensual in nature. In a letter dated May 5, 1904 Kellor wrote, “The colors and sunlight make me hungry for you my dear small six...It was so hard to go and leave you. There can be no goodnight here my dear.”<sup>34</sup> Another letter dated January 3, 1905 was similarly amorous. Kellor wrote, “I could put my arm around you and hunt out on of those tiny little curls—and embarrass you shy little girl.”<sup>35</sup> These letters indicate that Dreier and Kellor’s relationship was both romantic and sexual, which was not uncommon for women who loved women during this time period.

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<sup>32</sup> Frances Kellor to Mary Dreier, Mary Elisabeth Dreier Papers, Box 5, Folder 77, n.d., Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Elisabeth Dreier Papers, Box 5, Folder 77, Feb 1905, Aug 1907.

<sup>34</sup> Frances Kellor to Mary Dreier, Mary Elisabeth Dreier Papers, Box 5, Folder 77, 5 May 1904.

<sup>35</sup> Frances Kellor to Mary Dreier, Mary Elisabeth Dreier Papers, Box 5, Folder 77, 3 January 1905.

In addition to Mary Dreier, Wellesley graduate Marion Louise Bosworth (1881-1982) was also a reformer who engaged in an intense relationship with another woman, Ethel Sturtevant. Bosworth grew up in Elgin, Illinois attending Elgin Academy. She later moved to Wellesley, Massachusetts, studying at the Dana Hall School and Wellesley College where she graduated in 1907. Bosworth served as the Women's Educational and Industrial Union Fellow directly following her time at Wellesley, and in 1911 moved to Chicago where she worked in settlement houses and received a degree at the Chicago School of Philanthropy. Unfortunately, there is little information on her later life other than the fact that she lived and worked in public service across five other states. Bosworth and Sturtevant were intimate friends throughout their time at Wellesley College. Even though their relationship was short lived in comparison to Dreier, it was no less emotional or loving.

Bosworth and Sturtevant's extensive correspondence lasted during their time at college from 1902-1907 and ended abruptly in 1908. The two women wrote often to one another, their letters sometimes reaching upwards of twenty pages in length. Sturtevant wrote daily to Bosworth, recording her everyday experiences always signed "Lovingly Ethel." In an October 1905 letter, Sturtevant even sent her class schedule to Bosworth in hopes that they would be in the same classes. In turn, Bosworth often signed her letters "Yours as always, M."<sup>36</sup> The two women also used pet names like "Dearie," "My dear heart," and "my sweetheart."<sup>37</sup> As in other female friendships, the correspondence was romantic. In one letter Bosworth wrote, "Might I always wish I had you with me—every night."<sup>38</sup> In another letter Sturtevant pined for Bosworth.

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<sup>36</sup> Marion Louise Bosworth to Ethel Sturtevant, Marion Louise Bosworth Papers, Box 5, Folder 103, Sept to Dec 1904, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>37</sup> Marion Louise Bosworth Papers, Box 5, Folder 101, March to July 1904.

<sup>38</sup> Marion Louise Bosworth to Ethel Sturtevant, Marion Louise Bosworth Papers, Box 5, Folder 101, March to July 1904,

“My dear, you are mine and I want you...I know I’m selfish to want you to myself, but I love you.”<sup>39</sup>

Bosworth in her 1943 diary even acknowledged her strong feelings towards Sturtevant as she looked back on their relationship. “I never saw why ‘crushes’ were disapproved,” she wrote. “I thought them natural enough—they were for me.”<sup>40</sup> In this way, Bosworth explicitly placed her relationship with Sturtevant into the cultural context of college crushes. For her, crushes were a natural and essential part of the college experience, not an ecstatic relationship that distracted from her education.

Winnifred Wygal (1884-1972) on the other hand, had a series of romantic relationships with two different women. Wygal was born in Springfield, Missouri where she attended Drury College. There she began her avid participation in the Young Women’s Christian Association. Wygal volunteered and worked at the YWCA from 1919-1944. She also helped found the Fellowship of Socialist Christians and was an active contributor to the transnational Student Christian Movement. The two women Wygal was involved with were named Frances Perry and Helen Elizabeth Price. Her relationship with Perry lasted from the 1910s to the 1940s and possibly beyond.

Throughout Wygal’s 14 diaries from 1916-1942, she discussed her intense relationships with both of these women. Wygal wrote about her love and affections for Perry and Price, detailing their get-togethers with excitement and passion. “I was so glad to see her [Perry],” Wygal wrote.<sup>41</sup> “You are the lamb of my bosom. You have been since 1918 and will be until we

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<sup>39</sup> Ethel Sturtevant to Marion Louise Bosworth, Marion Louise Bosworth Papers, Box 6, Folder 106, June to July 1904.

<sup>40</sup> 1943 Diary, Marion Louise Bosworth Papers, Box 8, Folder 143v, 1943, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>41</sup> Diary VI, Winnifred Wygal Papers, Sept 1930, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

die.”<sup>42</sup> The following year, Wygal’s passionate feelings for Perry continued. She wrote, “She is so beautiful, so beautiful, so alike, so glowing, so gentle and...brain-y...She does love me.”<sup>43</sup> On the next page Wygal described her friendship with Price, but made sure to mention that it did “not threaten” her relationship with Perry. Wygal nevertheless detailed her love for Price in similar terms. In an August 30 entry she wrote, “I saw Helen price last night and...how nice!!— She is exquisite and I love her with adoration and delight and...passions. O I am so grateful that she has stepped into my life. I am so glad!!!”<sup>44</sup>

Based on how often Wygal discussed Perry in the diaries, it is clear that Perry played a large and important role in Wygal’s life. Wygal consistently documented her enthusiasm regarding her relationship with Perry. “On March 15<sup>th</sup>, Frances Perry wrote to me a wonderful letter. It makes me happy, happy,— O so happy. I grant that life is hard and mysterious and that F. Perry and I have gone through...adjustment in our relationship, but how nice a thing it has become.”<sup>45</sup> Clearly the passionate feelings were mutual. Wygal glued a typed letter dated March 15, 1932 from Perry, who was in London at the time. The letter read:

My other soul...I am endlessly happy about oh so many things...O Winnifred Wygal this friendship of ours is something made beautiful by being in a crucible of fire, of pain, of agony. If we can increasingly strip it of impurities burned away by fire it will be a thing in time of utter loveliness. Do you know what I am saying? Tell me you understand...I am filled with joy, filled with joy. I have no words to tell you...and I love you and love you and love you, my own my other soul.<sup>46</sup>

In this excerpt, Perry explicitly identified Wygal as her soulmate, emphasizing the romance and passion between the two women. The pain and agony Perry referred to may have been the fact

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<sup>42</sup> Diary VIII, Winnifred Wygal Papers, Oct 1932.

<sup>43</sup> Diary VIII, Winnifred Wygal Papers, March 1933.

<sup>44</sup> Diary VI, Winnifred Wygal Papers, 30 August n.d.

<sup>45</sup> Diary VIII, Winnifred Wygal Papers, March 1932.

<sup>46</sup> Diary VIII, Winnifred Wygal Papers, March 1932.

that the two women were away from one another often due to their need to travel for work. It also may have been societal pressure or disapproval because Wygal later destroyed much of her correspondence with both Perry and Price.

Mary Dreier, Marion Bosworth, and Winnifred Wygal are only several of countless women that engaged in same-sex female relationships during this time period. Faderman documented many others, including some well-known Progressive Era reformers. One of the first female physicians Emily Blackwell lived with her partner Elizabeth Cushier for almost 30 years until her death in 1910. Biographer Katherine Anthony and Elisabeth Irwin, the founder of New York's Little Red School House, raised and adopted children together over the course of their 30-year relationship. Jane Addams, the leader of the settlement house movement, had her first serious attachment with Ellen Starr who she met in college, and later with Mary Rozet Smith with whom Addams slept in the same room and bed for 40 years.<sup>47</sup>

In all of these women's friendships, the women involved engaged in passionate, and in many cases, long-term relationships. They were characterized by intensely romantic correspondence, sometimes explicitly sensual in nature. Frequently, one or both women were actively involved in a progressive political cause. Reform movements, like suffrage and labor reform for example, and the progressive-minded mentality of social cohesion, interdependence, and shared responsibility that dominated the period provided the context for many of these relationships to not only blossom but thrive.

For the most part, it seems that these relationships went relatively unquestioned. Even though Mary Dreier and Frances Kellor used codenames in their letters, they were free to write to one another and pursue their relationship, ultimately sharing a home for the majority of their lifetimes. In the case of relationships that did not last as long, like those of Marion Bosworth and

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<sup>47</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 23-25.

Ethel Sturtevant, as well as Winnifred Wygal and Frances Perry, they were still accepted by family members and friends. Wygal took trips with Perry and both women were intimately involved in one another's family lives. The same occurred with Bosworth and Sturtevant, even though their relationships ended after college. In this way, the culture of female friendship that pervaded the college educated middle and upper class allowed these women to actively pursue and engage in relationships with other women.



**Chapter 2**  
**“The Ecstatic Girl Lover”:**  
**Women who Loved Women in the First Two Decades of the Twentieth Century**

*“Your chosen friend should be some one of whom your mother approves...She should never lead you into foolish confidences. She should have sense enough to avoid the ecstatic friendships as if it were a dangerous disease. She should be perfectly able to live without you...I do believe that woman is happiest who has a true, honorable woman friend who is companionable, lacks inquisitiveness, and is always considerate and always true. She is the ideal friend, and the only one worth having. The object of the ecstatic friendships is a poor fraud, a base imitation.”*

– Ruth Ashmore, “The Intense Friendships of Girls,” *The Ladies' Home Journal* (1898)

Whereas in the late nineteenth century romantic friendships were common among women and for the most part unquestioned, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, new societal forces began to challenge this pervasive acquiescence. The development of sexology and an attendant interrogation of female romantic friendships spurred the establishment of the “female sexual invert.” Sexology, essentially the study of sex and sexuality, began as a niche area of scientific study in the late nineteenth century, but had firmly entered the public fray by World War I. Women who loved women consequently became suspect and were put under greater scrutiny by popular media, collegiate institutions, family members, and even their female peers. Their relationships, which had existed within a realm of acceptance and even reverence, was now put under the magnifying glass of societal propriety. Women who loved women were now compelled to defend the respectability and morality of their relationships.

The first medical article on sexual inversion was published in 1870 in Germany. It was not until a decade later that the American medical establishment began their own studies on the topic. By the mid-1910s a variety of American medical journals had devoted reoccurring columns to the study of sexology.<sup>1</sup> The profession of sexology emerged and became popularized as a response to white middle class values and concerns. The turn of the century witnessed new

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<sup>1</sup> George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance,” *Salmagundi*, (1982), 114–146, 115.

levels of immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and commercialization. Because of these changes, the white middle and upper classes turned to specialties like eugenics and sexology to explain the colossal societal changes and establish scientific justification for maintaining the status quo. Within this intellectual context, sexology flourished. It demarcated the lower classes and the non-white segment of the population as immoral and consumed by sexual license, while the middle and upper classes were seen to possess sexual propriety.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to preserving the status quo, sexology also sought to separate the sexually deviant from the sexually moral by medicalizing certain sexual practices, specifically “sexual inversion.” Sexual inversion was the most common term to denote homosexual behavior in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term however, was not synonymous with homosexuality, but instead denoted a broad range of deviant sexual and gender-related behaviors. Inversion was a loose label for a variety of non-procreative sexual acts thought to be against nature like masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, bestiality and tribadism, as well as a range of behaviors or characteristics such as cross-dressing, taking on qualities of the opposite sex, and genital and anatomical deficiencies. In this respect, homosexual desire was an aspect of sexual inversion but not the signifier.<sup>3</sup> As a result, whereas in earlier eras a person who engaged in such deviant conduct would have been condemned as a sinner, with the development of sexology, that person became a “congenital invert,” a “victim of inborn contrary sexual feeling,” or a “homosexual,” which as Lillian Faderman asserts, were “all ways of looking at same-sex love that had not existed [earlier].”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Princeton, 2009), 25-29.

<sup>3</sup> Chauncey, “Sexual Inversion,” 116-117.

<sup>4</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York, 1991), 40.

The development of medical literature on female sexual inversion in particular was intricately tied to the social and cultural developments of the early twentieth century. *The Index Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office* listed one article on female sexual inversion from 1740 to 1895. Between 1896 and 1916 however, the list expanded to almost 100 books and 566 articles on women's sexual "perversions" "inversions" and "disorders," displaying the proliferation of medical and layman interest in same-sex female relations.<sup>5</sup> According to George Chauncey in "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality," like eugenics, "the early biological explanations offered for sexual deviance were an integral part of that nineteenth-century scientific discourse which sought to validate the existing social order by asserting its biological inevitability." Early sexology therefore, "sought to justify the particular form of women's subordination to men during this period by asserting its biological determination."<sup>6</sup>

During this period, more women gained access to the public sphere, whether that was through the Progressive Era reform movements, the increase of manufacturing jobs available to lower-class women (even though the conditions of such manufacturing factories often proved to be squalid and dangerous), the expanding influence of the suffrage and feminist movements, and the growing popularity of women's higher education. By 1910, 140,000 women were enrolled in institutions of higher learning compared to just 40,000 three decades earlier.<sup>7</sup> These trends coincided with declining marriage and birth rates and the increase of foreign populations immigrating to the United States, all of which alarmed the white male upper class establishment,

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<sup>5</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion," 116-117.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education*, (New Haven, 1985), 63.

the same group who ultimately produced these sexological reports.<sup>8</sup> The surge of sexological literature on women therefore can be seen as response to women's growing autonomy and the disruption of middle-upper class sexual and gender norms.

Widespread notions of female passionless and the denial of female sexual desire set the groundwork for early sexological research on sexual deviance among women. Victorian ideology espoused the belief that women were asexual, lacking any passion or sexual desire. Only men possessed sexual urges, placing women as the passive objects of men's sexual desires. Under these circumstances, any expression of female lust was considered pathological. Because of the belief in the absence of female sexuality, at least in the early periods of the profession, lesbian relations could not be fully conceptualized among sexologists. Therefore, as Chauncey asserts, "a complete inversion or reversal of a woman's sexual character was required for her to act as a lesbian; she had literally to become man-like in her sexual desire."<sup>9</sup> Female deviance consequently focused on the adoption of aggressive sexual behavior, which often paralleled the descriptions of deviant men. Any embrace of masculinity among women whether that was in dress, behavior, or sexual desire became a signifier of sexual inversion. Chauncey asserts, "a woman could not invert any aspect of her gender role without inverting her complete role."<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the French sexologist Julien Chevalier, in his 1893 work *Inversion Sexuelle*, claimed lesbianism developed from "male emulation" activities like participating in masculine sports and becoming politically active.<sup>11</sup> Simply supporting feminist goals like advocating for equal rights and bonding with other women, according to American sexologist Dr. James Weir in an article entitled "The Effects of Female Suffrage on Posterity," was itself solid evidence that a

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<sup>8</sup> Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion," 139.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 117-118.

<sup>10</sup> Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion," 121.

<sup>11</sup> Julien Chevalier, *Inversion Sexuelle*, (1893) qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 46.

woman was “abnormal,” “degenerate,” and “viragint” (virigancy meaning an “advanced class of female inversion”).<sup>12</sup>

In the 1901 book *Sexual Inversion*, Havelock Ellis was one of the first sexologists to designate an entire chapter on the “Sexual Inversion of Women” and describe the relationships of female inverts as overtly sexual in nature. He focused primarily on gender reversal as the signifier of female sexual inversion. Ellis categorized two classes of female sexual inversion.

The first class was not a full invert, but the object of the invert’s desires. Ellis wrote:

[The first class is] formed by the woman to whom the actively inverted woman is most attracted. These women differ, in the first place, from the normal, or average, woman in that they are not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex. They are not usually attractive to the average man... Their sexual impulses are seldom well marked, but they are of strongly affectionate nature... and they are always womanly.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, Ellis stated that the second class consisted of the “actively inverted woman” who possessed “a more or less distinct trace of masculinity.” These masculine traits were “part of an organic instinct” rather than just imitation, taste, or habit.<sup>14</sup> She also displayed an “enthusiastic” admiration “of feminine beauty.”<sup>15</sup> The relationship between the sexually inverted woman and the object of her desire was also distinctively sexual. Ellis reported, “The passion [in this relationship] finds expression in sleeping together, kissing, and close embraces, with more or less sexual excitement, the orgasm sometimes occurring when one lies on the other’s body or else in mutual masturbation; the extreme gratification is cunnilingus, sometimes called sapphism.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. James Weir, “The Effects of Female Suffrage on Posterity,” *American Naturalist*, (1895) qtd in Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, (1901), 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 133-134.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 146.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

This conception of female sexual inversion espoused by Ellis dominated the late nineteenth century and continued into the first two decades of the twentieth century. The female sexual invert relationship was therefore always categorized as between one more masculine woman or “active invert” that took initiative and seduced the more “womanly” passive sexual object. The medical establishment also firmly accepted the congenital theory of sexual inversion. Sexual deviance was consequently deemed as a harmful disease rather than solely a sexual preference or desire.<sup>17</sup>

With this relationship in mind, sexologists began to investigate deviant elements in women’s homosocial institutions like textile factories, prostitution rings, convents, boarding schools, and women’s colleges.<sup>18</sup> Ellis pointed to sex-segregated facilities as the facilitator of female sexual inversion. He claimed “homosexuality is specially fostered by those employments which keep women in constant association, not only by day, but often at night also, without the company of men.”<sup>19</sup> These “employments” according to Ellis included large shops, factories, hotels, prisons, and women’s colleges.

Ellis devoted an entire chapter in his appendix to the sexual and romantic “friendships” among women in schools. He reported on specific cases in Italy, Britain, and the United States using the terms “flames” and “raves” as well as “crushes” to describe the relationships. He wrote:

The ardent attachments which girls in schools and colleges form to each other and to their teachers constitute a subject which is of considerable psychological interest... These girlish devotions, on the borderland between friendship and sexual passion, are found in all countries where girls are segregated for educational purposes.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Chauncey, “Sexual Inversion,” 136.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 127.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

Ellis went on to explain the common characteristics of these relationships, claiming that they were usually temporary in nature, did not typically involve congenital inversion, and often ended when one or both of the women involved found themselves engaging in more permanent impulses with men. These relationships often had sexual elements, like the desire to kiss, embrace, and sleep together. Ellis also described the possibility of long-lasting versions of these female relationships but in these cases sex was “scarcely the essential” or the “fundamental element.” Instead intense emotional attachment and devotion dominated these relationships causing them to be on the border but not part of true sexual inversion.<sup>21</sup>

A 1902 article by R. N. Shufeldt entitled “Dr. Havelock Ellis on Sexual Inversion” expanded on Ellis’ concern with female education institutions. Shufeldt argued that women’s colleges were “the great breeding ground” of female inversion.<sup>22</sup> Another medical work warned that too much socializing between girls lead to sexual perversion. “They kiss each other fondly... They embrace each other with mutual satisfaction. It is most natural, in the interchange of visits, for them to sleep together. They learn the pleasure of direct contact, and in the course of their fondling they resort to cunni-linguistic practices... After this the normal sex act fails to satisfy [them].”<sup>23</sup>

The sexological establishment’s concern with sexual inversion in women’s education facilities soon began to impact popular perceptions of female friendships. Magazines and periodicals directed at young college-aged women started to warn women of “dangerous” and “intense” female friendships. In an article entitled “The Intense Friendships of Girls,” Ruth Ashmore discussed the importance of proper female friendships while advising women to avoid

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<sup>21</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 130-132.

<sup>22</sup> R. N. Shufeldt, “Dr. Havelock Ellis on Sexual Inversion,” *Pacific Medical Journal*, (1902) qtd in Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

“ecstatic” ones. Ashmore declared, “I am a believer in the friendships of women, but personally I seriously object to, and do not wish to see any of my girls drift into the so-called ecstatic friendships that are just now fashionable.” Ashmore went on to compare these ecstatic relationships to weeds claiming that they grew rapidly without stability. “Such friendships cannot last, for they are foolish and wrong from their very beginning. The food upon which they feed is artificial, and the result is not real friendship.” Ashmore similarly pointed out specific characteristics of the dangerous “girl lover” such as her bitterness and indifference towards men, her passion for sentimentality and gift-giving, and intense jealousy.<sup>24</sup> Another article “Advice of a Father to Daughter Entering College” adopted a parallel discourse. The author encouraged his daughter to engage in female friendships, but informed her to avoid “narrowness,” “intensity,” and “crushes” in her relationships.<sup>25</sup>

Some authors took a more abrasive approach to female friendships in women’s colleges. Dr. Irving David Steinhardt in his 1914 book *Ten Sex Talks with Girls* specifically warned his female readers to beware of female sexual inverts. He wrote:

Avoid girls who are too affectionate and demonstrative in their manner of talking and acting with you...when sleeping in the same bed with another girl, old or young, avoid ‘snuggling up’ close together. Avoid the touching of sexual parts, including the breasts, and, in fact, I might say avoid contact of any parts of the body at all...and, after going to bed, if you are sleeping alone or with others, just bear in mind that beds are sleeping places. When you go to bed, go to sleep just as quickly as you can.<sup>26</sup>

Steinhardt condemned all non-reproductive sexual acts out of marriage including masturbation, homosexuality, as well as prostitution, claiming that engaging in such acts lead to moral

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<sup>24</sup> Ruth Ashmore, “The Intense Friendships of Girls,” *The Ladies' Home Journal* (1889-1907), (July, 1898), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Charles F. Thwing “Advice of a Father to a Daughter Entering College,” *The Independent: Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* (1848-1921), (August, 1911), 473.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Irving David Steinhardt, *Ten Sex Talks with Girls*, (Philadelphia, 1914), 60.



degradation and ending up in a “nameless grave” in a “pauper’s burying-ground.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that Dr. Steinhardt felt it necessary to advise girls to avoid such sexual conduct suggests that the practice was either relatively common or at least perceived to be spreading.

Because the medical establishment as well as popular literature, newspapers, and magazines began to scrutinize female friendships, women who loved women were compelled to engage in greater caution in their relationships and constantly prove their propriety. In *We Sing Diana* a popular early twentieth century novel by Wanda Fraiken Neff, the main character, Nora, details the shift of female friendships at Vassar from “the great human experience” to an intolerable and even deplorable type of relationship. When Nora is attending Vassar in 1913, it is so widespread for freshmen to have crushes on female professors and older students that she refers to it as “the Freshman disease.” However, when she returns to the school in 1920 to work as a professor, female crushes are no longer acceptable. Neff wrote, “Intimacy between two girls was watched with keen distrustful eyes. Among one’s classmates, one looked for the bisexual type, the masculine girl searching for a feminine counterpart, and one ridiculed their devotions.” Nora calls love between women “poison,” and describes two girls kissing as “a sick memory of the fungi she had studied in botany, the rank growths, forms of life springing up in unhealthy places, feeding on rot.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, sexual labels like the “bisexual type” and the “masculine girl” as well as a deep disgust for female love, which had not existed in the previous era, had now entered the popular fray, directly impacting same-sex female relationships.

Because of the growing awareness of female sexual deviance, women who lived during this era attempted to hide their relationships with other women or at least downplay the nature of their relationships. For example, the American author Willa Cather (1873-1947) dressed in male

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<sup>27</sup> Steinhardt, *Ten Sex Talks*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Wanda Fraiken Neff, *We Sing Diana*, Houghton Mifflin, (Boston, 1928) qtd in Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 35.

drag and often went by the name “William” while attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the 1890s. During her time at college, Cather had a romantic correspondence with fellow student Louise Pound. In a letter to Pound dated June 15, 1892 Cather wrote, “It is manifestly unfair that ‘feminine friendships’ should be unnatural, I agree with Miss De Pue [a classmate] that far.”<sup>29</sup> Cather signed the letter “Yours William” and advised Pound to make sure that no one was looking over her shoulder while she read the letter. In addition to Pound, Cather had a long-lasting and intense relationship with Isabelle McClung beginning around 1899. When McClung died in 1938 however, Cather had all of her letters returned and destroyed. As a result, there are only two remnants of their extensive and romantic correspondence.<sup>30</sup> Despite Cather’s numerous public relationships with other women during this period, after the turn of the century, according to Faderman, she adopted a more feminine persona and “cultivated an image of celibacy.”<sup>31</sup> She no longer signed her letters “William” but instead used her given name “Willa.” Nevertheless, Cather continued to pursue relationships with women, and in fact lived with her life-partner Edith Lewis in New York City from 1908 until her death in 1947.

Like Willa Cather, Jeanette Marks (1875-1964) also attempted to conceal the nature of her relationships with women during this time. Jeanette Marks was a Professor at Mt. Holyoke and spent 55 years living with her partner Mary Woolley, the President of Mt. Holyoke. Despite her loving and long-term relationship with another woman, Marks wrote a variety of works on the dangers of homosexuality and “unwise college friendships.” She deemed such relationships “unpleasant or worse” an “abnormal condition,” and an illness necessitating a “moral

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<sup>29</sup> *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, (New York, 2013), 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, xiii, 114.

<sup>31</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 53.

antiseptic.”<sup>32</sup> She also claimed that the only truly fulfilling relationship in life is between a woman and a man.<sup>33</sup> Whether these essays were a tool to divert from Mark’s own attraction to women or were her true opinions is impossible to discern. Faderman, however, argues that these essays were an attempt on the part of Marks to obscure and downplay her relationship with Mary Woolley, which they very well could be.<sup>34</sup> Regardless, both Cather and Marks took certain precautionary measures during this period when it came to their relationships with women, demonstrating an explicit change in popular perspectives of female friendships.

The first two decades of the twentieth century ushered in new approaches and perceptions into popular discourses of sexuality. The emerging profession of sexology served to demarcate the sexually deviant from the sexually moral, representing white middle class fears of a growing degenerate generation. In this context, female friendships were no longer revered as they were in past decades, but explicitly identified as a possible source of female sexual inversion. Consequently women who loved women were compelled to suppress and hide their relationships, constantly proving their propriety.

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<sup>32</sup> Jeanette Marks’ papers, “Unwise College Friendships,” Williston Memorial Library, Mt. Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

<sup>33</sup> Jeanette Marks’ papers, “Unwise College Friendships.”

<sup>34</sup> Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 53-54.

**Chapter 3**  
**“Pseudo-Bohemians”:**  
**Women Who Loved Women in the 1920s**

*“Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
 They must’ve been women, ‘cause I don’t like no men...  
 They say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me,  
 They sure got to prove it on me...”*

– Ma Rainey, “Prove It On Me Blues” (1928)

The 1920s were an ambiguous period for women who loved women. The social context of the 1920s, at least in urban areas, engendered greater sexual freedom for many women and greater acceptance of expressing female sexuality. Bohemian culture gave rise to bisexual experimentation and lesbianism as a stylish but temporary fad. On the contrary, a new focus on companionate marriage among the middle and upper class rendered heterosexual fulfillment and sexual pleasure as the pillars of female happiness. As a result, many women of these classes were pressured to abide by such conventions. Similarly, a new sexological emphasis on psychiatry and Freudian medical discourses further pathologized same-sex desires between women. Consequently, even though more women were experimenting with same-sex female love, the majority of women who loved women were ultimately pressured to engross themselves in heterosexual commitment.

By the 1920s the United States was dramatically different than it had been three decades before. For the first time, more than half of the population lived in cities rather than rural areas. During the decade, approximately six million people left the countryside for the city.<sup>1</sup> World War I placed America on the world stage with homefront mobilization and technological innovation leading to new levels of consumerism and national wealth. National income rocketed from \$480 per capita in 1900 to \$681 in 1929, while manufacturing output during the same

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<sup>1</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity 1914-1932*, (Chicago, 1993), 225.

period jumped 264 percent.<sup>2</sup> Workers in turn, received the highest wages in American history, rising 22 percent in just seven years.<sup>3</sup> The standard of living increased to a record high, even though millions were still left in poverty, ultimately widening the gap between the rich and the poor.<sup>4</sup> Because of the economic boom, many Americans now had surplus money to spend, creating a mass culture centered on consumerism and leisure.<sup>5</sup> Motion pictures, sporting events, amusement parks, and radio broadcasts became the heart of American leisure. The new decade also ushered in Prohibition as the final crusade of the Progressive Era. Even though alcohol production and sale was prohibited, bar culture flourished in speakeasies, jazz clubs, and secret bars in urban areas.

In addition to the development of mass culture and the implementation of Prohibition, the 1920s were a time of immense social change. Many young Americans during the 1920s were determined to rebel against the Victorian values that had dominated the previous generation. This rebellion took the form of bohemianism and nonconformity, which manifested itself in relaxed sexual mores, a passion for literature, art, and music, and resistance to Prohibition.<sup>6</sup> The “New Woman”—the flapper—embodied this social revolt.<sup>7</sup> The flapper wore short skirts, had bobbed hair, drank and went out at night, and adopted a more liberated female sexuality. Even though the flapper was never more than a minority of the female population, she epitomized the changing situation for women in the 1920s. With the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, women finally achieved the right to vote (even though many women had already been voting if they lived in a state with suffrage). Likewise, more women than ever worked in “pink collar” jobs as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 178-179.

<sup>3</sup> Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*, 178-179.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*, (New York, 1995), “Work and Consumption,” (56-97).

<sup>6</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York, 1991), 64-65.

<sup>7</sup> See Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, “The New Woman,” (98-144).

secretaries, assistants, and stenographers, increasing the totals of working women by 26 percent.<sup>8</sup> New household machinery and kitchen products helped cut down the time on household work, and more pocket money in the hands of women allowed them to participate in the emerging consumer and leisure economy.

The “liberated” flapper however, did not represent all 1920s women. This new sexual woman was very much a white, middle-class creation. For many non-white, immigrant, and working class women, these changes in sexual and workforce norms occurred earlier or never occurred for them at all.<sup>9</sup> Even though more than ten million women held jobs by 1930, the proportion of women in the workforce in 1930 was in fact less than it had been in 1910.<sup>10</sup> Women were still paid less than men and confined to “pink collar” jobs. Most women who regularly worked were lower class, black or immigrant women who labored to provide for their families or were recruited for unskilled jobs. Similarly, women, regardless of class, were still expected to perform most, if not all, household duties. This dichotomy between progress and the maintenance of the status quo, clearly present in the condition women, also manifested itself in 1920s sexological discourses.

Whereas sexological discourses in previous decades had focused on female inversion as a deviation from proper sexuality, which was grounded in reproduction, by the 1920s this conception of inversion had changed. The sexological establishment and psychoanalytic profession had become tightly interlocked, mainly due to the work of Sigmund Freud. According to William Leuchtenburg, after World War I, Freudian “psychology became a national mania.”<sup>11</sup> Lynn Dumenil states, “For middle-class Americans in the 1920s, Freud became a household

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<sup>8</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

name.”<sup>12</sup> Freud believed that free expression of the libido was essential to good health, inadvertently establishing a scientific rationale for “sexual indulgence.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to facilitating the 1920s “revolution of morals,” Freudian psychology also reinforced the emerging consumer culture. For instance, Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, was at the vanguard of using sexuality to sell everything from cigarettes to cars, and did so by calling explicitly on his uncle’s theories. Sexually charged songs like “Hot Lips” and “I Need Loving” as well as magazines like *Flapper Experiences* and *Paris Nights* dominated the sex-obsessed popular culture.<sup>14</sup>

Even though Freud did not release his official paper on female sexuality until 1931, plenty of his work during the early periods addressed female sexuality.<sup>15</sup> In his work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud asserted a link between mental illness and sexual immorality. He argued, “In my experience, anyone who is in any way, whether socially or ethically, abnormal mentally is invariably abnormal also in his sexual life.”<sup>16</sup> In essence, Freud argued that sexual inversion was rooted in psychological aberration at childhood, upsetting the proper developmental path to heterosexual fulfillment.<sup>17</sup> Freud’s rigid model for “normal” psychosexual development was comprised of a series of necessary stages in the production of sexual libido: the oral phase, the sadistic-anal phase, the phallic (or clitoral phase), a latency period, and finally the genital phase. Homosexuality therefore, could arise from a variety of circumstances that halted or disrupted any one of these stages. These disruptions could take the form of over-attraction to the mother, Oedipal conflict, ardent narcissism, or reaction formation due to jealousy of siblings or friends.<sup>18</sup> Freud’s theories of sexual inversion in this way drew on

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<sup>12</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 146.

<sup>13</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 166.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>15</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” (1920).

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, (1905), 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Certain Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia, and Homosexuality,” (1922).

sexological theories of previous decades, but also drove sexological theory in a new direction, one firmly rooted in psychology.

In addition to an emphasis on psychoanalysis, the sexological establishment began to propagate an ideal of companionate marriage. The middle class concept of companionate marriage was centered on mutual attraction, pleasure, and happiness between two heterosexual partners. In this way, heterosexuality was promulgated as the precursor to fulfillment and success in life. For instance, colleges and universities began implementing “marriage education” classes for their students. The first marriage education course originated at the University of North Carolina in 1927, and a decade later, over 200 of America’s 672 colleges and universities offered similar courses.<sup>19</sup> According to Lillian Faderman, “The leaders of this sexual revolution managed to make pleasure seem like medical necessity.”<sup>20</sup> If any woman, regardless of her sexual preference, refused to engage in sexual relations with a man, she was impeding her natural urge, leading to neurosis. On the other hand, if a woman chose to engage in sexual relations with another woman, she was fixating on childish desires, stunting her mental development. As George Chauncey argues, the emphasis on companionate marriage was epitomized in the flapper who was both “sexually precocious” and “profoundly heterosexual.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the new respect for heterosexual bonding and Freudian theories of sexuality, the female sexual invert and women’s sex-segregated institutions became evermore stigmatized in medical and psychological literature during the 1920s, even though these criticisms did not necessarily enter popular discourses until the following decade.

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<sup>19</sup> Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch To Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America*, (Baltimore, 1988), 124-125.

<sup>20</sup> Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance,” *Salmagundi*, (1982), 144.



The embrace of heterosexual love and passion as well as increasing discourse of sexuality in general, lead to more sexual freedom among women and the rest of the population. Greenwich Village and Harlem specifically became the centers of sexual liberation and experimentation of the 1920s. Beginning in the 1890s students from elite colleges and universities, liberal-minded intellectuals, and artists began moving to the Village because it offered autonomy and company with like-minded individuals. Those who lived in Greenwich Village called themselves “bohemian intellectuals,” in other words, “professionals who supported themselves through some vocation in arts and letters.”<sup>22</sup> They prided themselves on artistic freedom, progressivism, a passion for knowledge, and sexual modernism. The bohemians’ embrace of sexual modernism and free-love ethics—which Christine Stansell describes as “a faint tolerance of premarital sex for both men and women, the acknowledgement of female sexuality, and the acceptance of birth control”—set the groundwork for the 1920s “sexual revolution.”<sup>23</sup> The Village and other similar enclaves throughout the country therefore, became the heart of tolerance and sexual radicalism.

During the 1920s, the Village not only became an epicenter of open-mindedness, but also was solidified as a gay neighborhood. According to Chauncey in *Gay New York*, “the Village’s reputation for tolerating nonconformity (or ‘eccentricity’) and the impetus for social experimentation engendered in the district by the bohemians” made it an ideal place to live for women who loved women as well as their male counterparts.<sup>24</sup> The unconventionality of the artists and bohemians who lived there, allowed for those who assumed more flamboyant or butch styles of dress and behavior to blend in. Chauncey reports, “One 1927 account of New York nightlife noted that two women dancing together in a Times Square club elicited no comment,

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<sup>22</sup> Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*, (New York, 2000), 43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 273.

<sup>24</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, (New York, 1994), 229.

while in the Village it would be taken as a sign of their lesbianism.”<sup>25</sup> A 1923 invitation to the Greenwich Village ball had an illustration of two women dancing together, one in pants and the other in a dress. The invitation read, “Come all ye Revelers! Dance the night into dawn—Come when you like, with whom you like—Wear what you like—Unconventional? Oh, to be sure...”<sup>26</sup> In this way, the spread of bohemian culture in the 1920s allowed women who loved women and their gay male peers to create relatively autonomous enclaves for themselves that had not existed to the same extent before this time period.

Like Greenwich Village, Harlem also became an epicenter of sexual exploration. Harlem was not only the center of jazz, but home to some of the first drag balls and gay bars in New York City. The interwar era, according to Chauncey, was the “heyday” of lesbian and gay clubs and performers in Harlem.<sup>27</sup> The Hamilton Lodge Ball in Harlem was the largest gathering of gay men and lesbians in New York City. Lesbian “male impersonators,” “straight masqueraders,” and gay men all attended.<sup>28</sup> Many white middle class people also traveled to Harlem to entertain themselves at speakeasies, jazz shows, cabarets, and drag shows. According to Faderman, “They believed Harlem gave them permission—or simply took permission there—to explore what was forbidden... They could do in Harlem what they dared not to do anywhere else.” On the other hand, for those who engaged in same-sex love, Harlem became a refuge.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the famous Harlem blues singers of the 1920s were women who had same-sex female relationships. For example, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, and cross-dressing Gladys Bentley, were all women who loved women. In fact, many of these

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>26</sup> “Invitation to the Greenwich Village Ball”, 1931, History: 1920s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>27</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 251.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>29</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 68.

women, as well as other well-known blues singers, wrote songs about women engaging in same-sex dalliances. In a song entitled “It’s Dirty But Good” the singer suggested that while sex between two women may be immoral, it was still pleasurable and deliciously scandalous.<sup>30</sup>

Another song, “Boy in the Boat” by George Hannah also dealt with same-sex female relations:

Lots of these dames had nothing to do.  
 Uncle Sam thought he’d give ‘em a fightin’ chance,  
 Packed up all the men and sent ‘em on to France,  
 Sent ‘em over there the Germans to hunt,  
 Left the women at home to try out all their new stunts.<sup>31</sup>

The song insinuated that with all of the men being called overseas to serve during World War I, women began to turn to each other, learning about new sexual practices that incorporated the so-called “boy in the boat,” a euphemism for the clitoris. Other songs of the period like “BD [Bulldyker] Women’s Blues” and “BD’s Dream” also more or less explicitly mentioned or discussed the experiences of women who loved women.

The more general sexual openness of the 1920s, the popularity of bohemianism, and the emergence of a lesbian and gay subculture in Greenwich Village and Harlem, all served to create a societal environment where bisexual experimentation became acceptable. According to Faderman, the fad of bisexual experimentation or “lesbian chic” is thought to have originated in the 1920s. As Chauncey argues, dabbling in homosexuality, especially among women had become chic among many Villagers “simply because it seemed the thing to do.” Caroline Ware in her book *Greenwich Village* called these women “pseudo-lesbians” as they were a subcategory of “pseudo-bohemians.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “It’s Dirty But Good” qtd in Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, (New York, 1992), 77.

<sup>31</sup> George Hannah, “Boy in the Boat,” *AC-DC Blues: Gay Jazz Reissues*, Side B, Stash Records, ST-106 qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Ware, *Greenwich Village, 1920-1930*, (Berkeley, 1994) qtd in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 235.

The truth of the time period, regardless of what they chose to call themselves, was that women were in fact engaging in sexual relationships with other women. In the 1920s, Katharine Bement Davis, the head of the New York Bureau of Social Hygiene, organized a research study on the sexuality of “normal” females. In other words, these women were middle to upper class, mostly white women, recruited through college alumni lists and club memberships directories. The 1929 study found that 1,200 females or 50.4 percent admitted “intense emotional relations” with other women, and 25.2 percent of those who admitted to emotional relationships said those experiences were either “accompanied by sex or recognized as sexual in character.”<sup>33</sup> Bement however, never specified what exactly “intense emotional relations” consisted of, leaving the subjects with room for interpretation. In addition, the study found that 78 percent of the women who admitted these intense emotional relations had been college women, while 88 percent of those who said the experiences were sexual had been college women. Many reported that these relationships originated in women’s colleges and one woman described them as “an expression of love [which has] made my life inexpressibly richer and deeper.”<sup>34</sup> By 1920, 283,000 women were attending institutions of higher learning, comprising almost half of all students enrolled.<sup>35</sup> As in previous decades therefore, women’s colleges served as a location where women who loved women could begin or continue to engage in such romantic and sexual relationships with other women.

Because sexological discourses centered on heterosexual fulfillment and Freudian psychoanalysis, bisexual experimentation became the only acceptable form in which women who loved women could pursue relationships with other women. According to Faderman, “While sex

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<sup>33</sup> Katharine Bement Davis, *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women*, (New York, 1929), 247.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 308.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education*, (New Haven, 1985), 63.

between women was acceptable and even chic in circles that were enamored with the radical or the exotic, serious love relationships between women could no longer be highly regarded since they could interfere with companionate heterosexual relationships.”<sup>36</sup> People approached same-sex female relationships with feelings of ambiguity. Bisexual experimentation was something of which all bohemian women should take advantage, but at the same time, it was never deemed as equal to heterosexual commitment, which was the inevitable and healthy course for a young woman. In this context, same-sex female relationships were only understood as a temporary fad, one that was ultimately and inevitably replaced by heterosexual companionate marriage.

This pattern of companionate marriage replacing bisexual experimentation was characteristic of many women who lived during the time period. For example, Pulitzer Prize winning poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) epitomized the life of a woman who loved women in the 1920s. One contemporary reported that Millay “became, in effect, the unrivaled embodiment of sex appeal, the It-girl of the hour, the Miss America of 1920.”<sup>37</sup> Millay attended Vassar College where she went by Vincent and had a few significant relationships with other female students. After her time at Vassar, she moved to Greenwich Village in 1917. Until she moved to New York, Millay had exclusively engaged in relationships with other women. Once she entered the city however, she was pressured to have relationships with men and take on the “chic” and more acceptable bisexual identity.<sup>38</sup>

While living in the Village, Millay became involved with Floyd Dell. Dell repeatedly attempted to guide Millay towards heterosexuality, devaluing her previous relationships with women. According to his unpublished memoirs, Dell slept with Millay claiming it was his

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<sup>36</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 155.

<sup>38</sup> Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York, 2002).

responsibility to “rescue her.”<sup>39</sup> Dell went on to write, “It was impossible to understand [Millay]...she may have been fonder of women than of men” and consequently encouraged Millay to submit to psychoanalysis to “overcome” her attraction to women.<sup>40</sup>

In 1923, after denying marriage proposals from Floyd Dell and another man Edmund Wilson, Millay ended up marrying a man. Throughout her 26-year marriage however, Millay continued to have various lovers, both men and women. According to Faderman, “The kind of pressure that was put on Millay to give up her love for women, or at least to make it take a secondary position to heterosexuality, was probably typical of what happened to young females even in this most bohemian environment during the 1920s, when love between women such as had been so vital in earlier eras was devalued.”<sup>41</sup>

Ruth Mellor (1889-1989), a lesser-known social worker of the twentieth century, had a similar experience to Millay in the 1920s. Mellor was born in Connecticut and graduated from Smith College in 1912. She earned a Masters in psychiatric social work in 1923. She worked at a variety of public service organizations like the Red Cross, Child Guidance Demonstration Clinic, Children’s Aid Society, Massachusetts and Connecticut Societies for Mental Hygiene, and ultimately finished her career as the executive director of the Mental Hygiene Clinic in Louisville until her death.

Mellor had several significant relationships with women during the 1920s. From 1928 to 1929 Mellor had a passionate correspondence with her lover Marion W. Bomer, known as “Maisie” or “Wendy.” There are 27 love letters from Bomer to Mellor during that year. Mellor had insisted upon one year of separation during which Bomer wrote the letters. Bomer referred to

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Humphrey, *Children of Fantasy: The First Rebels of Greenwich Village*, (New York, 1978), 224 qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> Emily Hahn, *Romantic Rebels: An Informal History of Bohemians in American*, (Boston, 1967), 241 qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 87.

<sup>41</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 87.

Mellor as a variety of pet names including “my dear dear dearest little heart,” “my most blessed,” “my beloved little baby,” and “my blessed darling.”<sup>42</sup> Throughout the correspondence Bomer pined for Mellor, begging to be reunited and continually declaring her love and devotion to her. She wrote, “Just love me and let me have you in my live...only love me and let me see you and have you in my life to cherish.”<sup>43</sup> In another letter, Bomer continued to beg for Mellor’s love. “I cannot tell you my feeling of despair. I beg you my very precious heart to have me, to love me, for I have never felt such tenderness for you. I can’t think thoughts and I each day ache in despair.”<sup>44</sup> Bomer went on, “I have cried until I am exhausted...my heart has never been touched in the same way—it never can again.”<sup>45</sup> In a letter dated February 5, 1929, Mellor finally responded to Bomer to assuage her concerns that she no longer loved her. She wrote, “Don’t you believe it any longer. All week I have thought of slipping away unseen and seeing you.”<sup>46</sup>

Mellor however, also had relationships with men. There are a series of at least twelve love letters from George de Schweinitz to Mellor written during the 1930s. In a letter dated March 24, 1939, written from his bedroom at one in the morning, Schweinitz sent Mellor a love poem entitled “Remembering” describing the heartache and pain of lost love.<sup>47</sup> From the poem it seems like Mellor’s love affair with Schweinitz was likely one-sided, with him craving for her love and attention and Mellor refusing to give it to him. Mellor herself never married but had a long-lasting relationship with her fellow married Smith graduate Mildred Scott Olmsted until her death.

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<sup>42</sup> Marion Bomer to Ruth Mellor, 30 July 1928, 28 March 1929, 3 February 1928, Ruth Mellor Papers, Box 1, Folder 9, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

<sup>43</sup> Marion Bomer to Ruth Mellor, 3 February 1929, Ruth Mellor Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

<sup>44</sup> Marion Bomer to Ruth Mellor, 11 June, Ruth Mellor Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

<sup>45</sup> Marion Bomer to Ruth Mellor, 23 March 1929, Ruth Mellor Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Mellor to Marion Bomer, 5 February 1929, Ruth Mellor Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.

<sup>47</sup> George de Schweinitz to Ruth Mellor, 24 March 1939, Ruth Mellor Papers, Box 1, Folder 11, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

In both the cases of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Ruth Mellor, these women pursued professional careers and were educated in women's colleges where their relationships with women had been relatively tolerated. When they exited college and entered the urban world of the 1920s however, their relationships with women were framed as experimentation. Millay was pressured by her own male lover to marry, while Mellor took on a male lover unenthusiastically. In the end, both women continued to have relationships with women into the end of their lives, Millay under the guise of her heterosexual marriage, and Mellor with another married woman. The once popular Victorian Era female friendship no longer existed as a palpable option for these women. Same-sex female love under the façade of experimentation then, was more accepted because it did not possess as much of a threat to the pervasive ideal of companionate heterosexual marriage.

The 1920s were a paradoxical period in American sexual history. On the one hand, the profession of sexology was quickly gaining clout, advancing ideals of heterosexual fulfillment, companionate marriage, and Freudian psychology. On the other hand, bohemian culture grounded in the rebellion against Victorian ideals, was taking over urban areas, helping to facilitate the emergence of a gay and lesbian subculture in places like Greenwich Village and Harlem. This new sexual openness helped facilitate relationships between women who loved women in the form of bisexual experimentation and "lesbian chic." Under this context however, women were still forced to police their own relationships, facing pressure to ultimately end their lives in heterosexual partnership.



**Chapter 4**  
**“A Pitiful Affliction”:**  
**Women who Loved Women in the 1930s**

*“There is no gangrenous corruption of body and soul in the sexually aberrated female. She is only a bundle of repressed and abnormal desires. When lacking the fortitude to repress completely such desires her entire existence becomes a life in death, and death in life—a living sepulcher behind the thick walls of the madhouse. Mental aberration knows no class. Sexual perversion being a disturbance of the nervous system is to be found in the fashionable sections as well as in the slums.”*

– Dr. Maurice Chideckel, *Female Sex Perversion: The Sexually Aberrated Woman as She Is*, (1935)

Although some of the sexual openness and relative tolerance of the 1920s continued into the following decade, in many ways, the 1930s gave way to more sexual rigidity and a conservative backlash. The Great Depression created both economic and social panic. The Depression forced two million women into unemployment by 1931. As of 1933, that number had doubled, contributing to the overall unemployment of 13 to 15 million American workers.<sup>1</sup> This economic insecurity destabilized the family unit, causing many members of the middle and upper classes to place increasing emphasis on conventional family values. Likewise, in the 1930s, sexologists, now almost indistinguishable from psychologists, labeled homosexuality a mental illness. Female sexual perverts were deemed sick and monstrous in both the medical establishment as well as in books, theater, and the media. In this context, many women who loved women in the 1930s were forced into heterosexual marriages, either for economic security or for fear of being branded a deviant. Some women however, did continue their relationships with other women under the guise of heterosexual marriage or immersed themselves in the budding lesbian subculture at their own peril.

The late 1920s ushered in the greatest economic collapse of the twentieth century. Prohibition also concluded in 1933 after 13 years with the ratification of the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, (Boston, 1982), 32.

Each of these moments had a fundamental impact on the culture of the 1930s. The economic gains of the 1920s were erased in a matter of months after the stock market crash of 1929. Farm prices had already plummeted during the previous decade, but the crash only worsened the situation for farmers with agricultural income falling from \$12 billion to \$5 billion in just three years.<sup>2</sup> By 1932, manufacturing output had dropped to 54 percent of what it had been in 1929, while factory wages dwindled from \$12 billion to \$7 during the same time period.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, American trade abroad fell from \$10 billion in 1929 to just \$3 billion in 1932. In these same three years, 100,000 people, women included, were fired on average every week. Because of the massive unemployment rates and economic insecurity, most young people postponed marriage and if married, pushed back on having children.<sup>4</sup> The Great Depression upset every domain of American life and touched every individual residing in the United States.

Women especially felt the brunt force of the Great Depression. Many of them were pushed out of their jobs because they were seen to threaten male employment. Not only did a large segment of the population believe that certain kinds of work defeminized women, but many others explicitly argued that women should leave the workforce. The Dean of Barnard College told one graduating class that every woman must determine for herself whether it is actually necessary for her to be employed. If not, the dean said, “perhaps the greatest service that you can render to the community...is to have the courage to refuse to work for gain.”<sup>5</sup> In a 1939 article entitled “Will Women Lose Their Jobs?” Norman Cousins criticized various efforts to expel women from their jobs in order to cure the Depression. He called this idea “the greatest assault on women’s rights in two decades.” He wrote, “There are approximately 10,000,000 people out

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<sup>2</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity 1914-1932*, (Chicago, 1993), 248.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 246, 252.

<sup>4</sup> Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*, 247.

<sup>5</sup> Edna McKnight, “Jobs—For Men Only? Shall We Send Women Workers Home?,” *Outlook and Independent*, (September 2, 1931), 12-13.

of work in the United States today. There are also 10,000,000 or more women, married and single, who are jobholders. Simply fire women, who shouldn't be working anyways, and hire the men. Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No depression."<sup>6</sup>

Cousins reported that during the 1930s, 22 states introduced some kind of legislation aimed at decreasing unemployment for men by restricting the employment of women, especially married women. In fact, one bill in California intended to make the employment of married women in private business and public office illegal. Twelve other states were attempting to pass similar bills. Nevertheless, according to the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, the reason a majority of these married women were working was not because they necessarily longed for economic independence, but because of a demand to support their families and supplement their husband's income.<sup>7</sup> Nine out of ten women fell into this latter category. Therefore, competition for jobs during the Depression was really between men themselves, rather than between men and women. According to data cited by Cousins, at most not more than one million jobs held by women at the time could have been passed to men.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, many women who previously worked or were hoping to enter the workforce found themselves without jobs during the 1930s.

The 1930s also witnessed an onslaught of the 1920s sentiments of sexual and bohemian openness. In many ways, the anti-gay crusades of the 1930s were part of a more general response to the "cultural experimentation" of the 1920s and societal disorder of the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup> One 1935 newspaper article recounted the crackdown of nightclubs and theaters in Chicago

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<sup>6</sup> Norman Cousins, "Will Women Lose Their Jobs?," *Current History*, (September, 1939), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cousins, "Will Women Lose Their Jobs?"

<sup>9</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, (New York, 1994), 331.

permitting “indecent performances” and “catering to women who prefer men’s attire.”<sup>10</sup> The Mayor of Chicago exclaimed that “such places” were a “disgrace to any city, and they will not be tolerated...Every joint of such character will be closed.”<sup>11</sup> This new “anti-gay vigilance” quickly extended to other urban areas. For instance, the vaudeville circuit forbade their performers from using the terms “pansy” and “fairy” in their performances. Similarly, various states passed laws prohibiting both male and female impersonation on stage.<sup>12</sup> In Hollywood, the Production Code established strict regulations against the representation of homosexuality. Whereas in decades before where homosexuals and homosexual situations were depicted in film, in the 1930s these types of images were banned altogether.<sup>13</sup> In most cases, these crusades against homosexuality were specifically targeted at gay men, but they were symptomatic of a more generalized antipathy towards all non-heterosexuals and consequently did affect women who loved women as well.

The crackdown on bohemia and homosexuality was most extreme in New York City. In 1931, the media began a campaign against Greenwich Village and its nightlife. One article condemned Greenwich Village for corrupting youth. It called the Village a “sinful” place that “lays trap for innocent girls,” “lures young people to the lairs of Gotham,” and serves as a “tomb for the living waifs...and cracked minds.” The article went as far to name the Village “the interior of Manhattan’s cancer.”<sup>14</sup> Law enforcement consequently began to act on the media’s claims. The New York City Police Commissioner stationed officers at nightclubs and bars that served homosexual clientele, and shut down many of the city’s infamous drag balls.<sup>15</sup> State

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<sup>10</sup> “Shut 2 Night Clubs with Girls Garbed as Men, and Theaters,” July 16, 1935, History: 1930s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Can’t Call ‘Em Pansies, And Take Your Thumb Away From Your Nose” qtd in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 353.

<sup>13</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 353.

<sup>14</sup> “Greenwich Village Sin,” 1931, History: 1920s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>15</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 332.

liquor authorities worked with local police to revoke licenses for bars that not only served but simply tolerated homosexuals.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 actually served to suppress what had been a relatively visible gay and lesbian world in 1920s urban areas like New York City. According to Chauncey, “Repeal inaugurated a more pervasive and more effective regime of surveillance and control. Repeal made it possible for the state to redraw the boundaries of acceptable sociability that seemed to have been obliterated in the twenties.”<sup>17</sup> After the end of Prohibition, law enforcement authorities could more easily target locales that welcomed sexual deviants. As a result, myriad establishments that had previously served as social gathering spots for women who loved women and their male peers were shut down. Law enforcement authorities were determined to push what had been a visible subculture back into the city’s margins, segregating the gay and lesbian social world from the rest of society.

In terms of sexology, the 1930s marshaled in the widespread belief among the public and medical establishment that female sexual deviants were pathetic pariahs. Psychiatrist Victor Robinson in the introduction of a 1939 lesbian autobiography called lesbianism a pitiful “affliction.”<sup>18</sup> The view that female inverts were mentally ill became commonplace in the medical field. With the propagation of the view that same-sex female love was an affliction, the earlier Victorian reverence of female friendship was completely forgotten.

For example, one sexologist, Dr. Maurice Chideckel took an in depth look at the plight of female sexual deviance in his 1935 book *Female Sex Perversion: The Sexually Aberrated Woman*. The book relied on the assertion that sex perversion was a mental disease. Chideckel

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<sup>16</sup> “SLA’s Brief in Opposition to Motion for Leave to Appeal to the Court of Appeals” qtd in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 452

<sup>17</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 334.

<sup>18</sup> Diana Frederics, *Diana: A Strange Autobiography*, (1939) qtd in Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York, 1991), 100.

argued, “The fact remains that the female sex pervert with whom we are dealing is afflicted with a mental disequilibrium. She may belong to the class of the cultured and refined, she may be a woman of marked intellectual achievements, but once she is of perverted instincts the part of her mentality that has dominion over sex is diseased.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that any woman could potentially be a sexual pervert differed from previous sexological views on homosexuality. In the past, Havelock Ellis and other sexologists had pointed to specific physical traits that designated perversion like cross-dressing, a propensity towards masculine behaviors, or even an enlarged clitoris. By the 1930s however, with sexual deviancy firmly rooted in psychology and mental illness, perversion became even more insidious because anyone regardless of physical characteristics could possess the sickness of homosexuality.

In a similar vein to Ellis, Dr. Chideckel defined three classes of female sexual perverts. The first were women who were primarily attracted to men but desired equal status to men, in other words, any woman with feminist affiliations. Chideckel claimed that these women occasionally married but never completely renounced homosexual practices. The second class was women who had little or no interest in men. These women always took the submissive role in sexual intercourse with their female partners. These homosexuals were “the wife” in the relationship.<sup>20</sup> The final class was women who took the active role in sex with their female partners. These women used a surrogate in place of the male sex organ.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that sex between female perverts in Chideckel’s book is always defined by vaginal intercourse. In this way, according to the sexological establishment, female perverts still relied on a heterosexual model of sex. True sex therefore, regardless of the genders involved, still required

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<sup>19</sup> Maurice Chideckel, *Female Sex Perversion: The Sexually Aberrated Woman as She Is*, Eugenics Publishing Company, (New York 1935), vii, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>21</sup> Chideckel, *Female Sex Perversion*, 90.

the use of a phallus, which suggests the continued influence of the gender inversion model on medical views of homosexuality.

Like the sexologists of the early twentieth century, Chideckel took special interest in female-only settings. He devoted an entire chapter of his book to “Institutionalized Homosexuals.” In other words, women in homosocial environments like boarding schools, convents, women’s colleges, and prisons. These women were unique in the sense that they were all heterosexual before they entered the institution. Consequently, it was the institutions themselves that created homosexuality, not only because there were no members of the opposite sex within these institutions, but also because they permitted such homosexual conduct. Chideckel called these women “pseudo-homosexuals” because as soon as they left the institutions they regained their heterosexuality. Very few continued their same-sex sexual conduct or became “bisexuals.”<sup>22</sup> Chideckel reported a case where this setting produced an explicitly sexual relationship between women. He wrote, “I asked a girl once, just returning from a private school for girls, whether she was married. The answer was: ‘Well, sort of.’ Pressed for a more specific answer she admitted on having been a pseudo-invert. She and her roommate would tickle each other’s genitals with a feather and obtain an orgasm.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to sexual interactions, these same-sex relationships were also characterized by temporary but intense crushes, and passionate written correspondence. In this way, Chideckel took what had been common characteristics of late nineteenth and early twentieth century female friendships—school-girl crushes, passionate letter-writing, intense feelings of companionship—and stigmatized them as symptoms of mental illness. No longer could a woman have a deep friendship with another woman, because if she did, she would be condemned as a pervert.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 135-136.

<sup>23</sup> Chideckel, *Female Sex Perversion*, 139.

Chideckel ended his book by focusing on treatment. “The turbulent life of the sex pervert is doomed to defeat; condemned to eternal night, unless enlightened, analyzed and treated,” he claimed. “Enlightenment alone can aid her in the unequal struggle between her impulses and her self.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, unlike sexologists of the past, Chideckel asked his readers to pity the female pervert. Because homosexuality was defined as a mental illness, there was now the potential for a cure. This widespread view and the fact that few women who identified as lesbians spoke out publicly, lead to the fact that medical doctors were relatively unobstructed in their desire to prevent or treat homosexuality through education, psychotherapy, hormonal injections, and other special treatments. Doctors claimed homosexuals “remained at an immature level of social adjustment” and would not be able to attain such acceptable maturity as long as they were homosexual.<sup>25</sup> Newspapers all over the country detailed the success of treatments for women who were sexually perverse, mentally ill, or “suffering from masculine psychological states,” in laymen terms, loving other women.<sup>26</sup>

The image of the monstrous, sick lesbian and immoral sexual pervert not only dominated medical and psychological discourses. These images were present in 1930s literature and popular culture as well. One author in the 1931 novel *Loveliest of Friends!* described lesbians as “crooked, twisted freaks of nature who stagnate in dark and muddy waters, and are so cloaked with the weeds of viciousness and selfish lust that, drained of all pity, they regard their victims as mere stepping stones to their further pleasures.”<sup>27</sup> This author took an explicitly malicious view

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>25</sup> Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, (New York, 1990) qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sheila Donisthorpe, *Loveliest of Friends!*, (New York, 1831) qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 101.



of sexual inversion, but many others adopted more subtle condemnations of female homosexuality.

The 1934 play “The Children’s Hour” for example, was the first authorized production that dealt with same-sex female desires on stage. The play however, never explicitly mentioned the word lesbianism or the more commonly used term sexual perversion, and instead used euphemistic phrases like “unnatural feelings” and “sinful sexual knowledge” to describe the relationship between the two main characters. One reviewer called “The Children’s Hour” a “good play about a verboten subject.”<sup>28</sup> Both of these words, lesbian and sexual pervert, had entered popular discourse in the 1920s, but Hellman and her reviewers still refused to address these terms explicitly. Similarly, as in most 1930s works of lesbian popular culture, the “The Children’s Hour” ended in tragedy with the suicide of one of the women and the life-ruining isolation of the other.

Newspapers also propagated this negative imagery of women who loved women. Every news report had a sensationalist tilt, condemning these types of women as abnormalities. One article about the subject was entitled “Man or Woman? The Strange Exotic World of the Twilight Men and Women Revealed.”<sup>29</sup> Another similar article was titled “Mysterious Fascination: A Great Social Evil Uncovered.”<sup>30</sup> In this way, popular culture only contributed to the stigma of lesbians as aberrant.

Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* was part of one of the greatest popular culture disputes of the 1930s. This book served as the most famous lesbian novel from its publication in 1928 until at least 1970. According to Esther Newton, *The Well of Loneliness’s*

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<sup>28</sup> “The Theater,” November 21, 1934, History: 1930s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>29</sup> “Man or Woman? The Strange Exotic World of the Twilight Men and Women Revealed,” History: 1930s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>30</sup> “Mysterious Fascination: A Great Social Evil Uncovered,” History: 1930s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

female protagonist Stephen Gordon was “Without question, the most infamous mannish lesbian.” Hall herself was an out and “militantly tie-wearing” self-identifying female invert.<sup>31</sup> The book was immersed in controversy immediately from its publication. One newspaper in describing the plot of the book called the novel a “heart-stirring, pathetic story of an English gentlewoman, born to be one of those unusual offshoots of nature, an incurable invert.”<sup>32</sup> Even when praised, female inversion within the novel was deemed abnormal and pitiful.

The British Home Secretary banned *The Well of Loneliness*. The editor of London’s *Sunday Express* said the book’s theme was “utterly inadmissible in a novel and that the subject was undiscussable.” He described it as “an intolerable outrage.” “I would rather,” he wrote, “give a healthy boy or girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body but moral poison kills the soul.”<sup>33</sup> Radclyffe Hall personally responded to the ban. She said in defense of her novel, “I claim that far from encouraging depravity, my book is calculated to encourage a mutual understanding between normal persons and the inverted, which can only be beneficial to both and to society at large.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, Hall’s justification for the book was grounded in sexological language, defining herself and her main character as an invert.

New York followed London’s lead. The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice was determined to censure the book, invoking the 1873 Comstock Law, which was designed to target obscene and lascivious material. Under the guise of the Comstock Law, police detectives consequently seized 865 copies of *The Well of Loneliness* and charged the publisher with selling an obscene publication.<sup>35</sup> In a February 1929 decision, a New York Magistrate’s Court denied

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<sup>31</sup> Esther Newton, “Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs*, (Summer, 1984), 559.

<sup>32</sup> “The most Fought About – Talked About – Praised and Condemned – Novel of the Present Generation,” History: 1930s, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>33</sup> “A Poisonous Novel,” *Natal Witness*, (Sept. 13, Year Unknown).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Leslie A Taylor, “‘I Made Up My Mind to Get It’: The American Trial of the *Well of Loneliness*, New York City, 1928-1929,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (April, 2001), 250-286.

the defendant's motion to dismiss the complaint, claiming that novel was obscene and had no moral value. The court stated:

The book culminated with an extended elaboration on her [the female invert's] intimate relations with a normal young girl, who became a helpless subject of her influence and passion... The book had no moral value because it sought to justify the right of a pervert to prey on normal members of a community and to uphold such a relationship as noble. The novel was calculated to corrupt members of the community who were to be susceptible to its influence.<sup>36</sup>

Much of the media applauded the decision. A *New York Daily Journal* article claimed *The Well of Loneliness* "treated perversion in a daring way...too daring" for civil society.<sup>37</sup> Others disagreed. A journalist at *The New Republic* argued that the book was "a novel of purpose," "a plea to society for the rights of the individual," and "a challenge which must be met because it is an appeal against the injustice and cruelty of society."<sup>38</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, the famous bohemian writer and bisexual herself, even joined the conversation asserting, "To censor *The Well of Loneliness* is nonsense...an offensive impertinence."<sup>39</sup> In spite of the media frenzy, after the Magistrate's decision, the case was ultimately referred to the New York Court of Special Sessions for judgment. On April 19, the court dismissed the case, arguing that even though the novel dealt with a "delicate social problem" it was not obscene.<sup>40</sup> At this point, however, the publishers had already finalized seven different reprints of the novel.<sup>41</sup>

Even though *The Well of Loneliness* received a multitude of negative press, it was the first novel to tackle the issue of female sexual perversion that garnered such public attention. In

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<sup>36</sup> *People v. Friede*, 133 Misc. 611, 233 N.Y.S. 565 (N.Y. Misc. 1929).

<sup>37</sup> "Her Book Too Daring," *New York Daily Journal*, (August 30, Year Unknown).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Morss Lovett, *The New Republic*, (January 2, 1929), 195 qtd in Taylor, "I Made Up My Mind to Get It," 267.

<sup>39</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay to Morris Ernst, January 23, 1929, File: Testimonials, Box 383, MEC qtd in Taylor, "I Made Up My Mind to Get It," 268.

<sup>40</sup> "Well of Loneliness' Cleared in Court Here," *New York Times*, (April 20, 1929).

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, "I Made Up My Mind to Get It," 281.

the first month of its publication in the United States, publishers sold 20,000 copies, and in the first year, they sold 100,000.<sup>42</sup> The book became “the one novel that every literate lesbian in the four decades between 1928 and the 1960s would certainly read.”<sup>43</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* provided many women who loved women with solace in finally seeing themselves represented in popular culture by an author who identified as a “female invert” herself. Hall’s novel depicted a journey of self-realization, from feeling different from her heterosexual peers, to finally finding and embracing a label, “invert,” that articulated her identity. In this way, *The Well of Loneliness* took a topic that had been primarily relegated to the medical establishment and finally moved it to the public sphere, making the themes relatable and digestible to the average woman. Hall’s novel therefore gave many women who loved women the language to finally describe themselves and their desires.

The effects of the Great Depression, the propagation of a sexological discourse focused on mental aberration, and the growing fascination with sensationalist stories of female inversion all contributed to a conflicting environment for women who loved women. By 1930, 481,000 women were enrolled in institutions of higher learning. That number increased to 601,000 by the end of the decade.<sup>44</sup> With society’s heightened awareness of deviant female sexuality, many of these college women were fearful of having relationships with their female peers. Two female journalists conducted a study of 1,300 female college students over the course of the 1930s and concluded that lesbianism during the decade was less prevalent among college women than it had been in the 1920’s “when a few campus leaders in several of the larger women’s colleges

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>43</sup> Lillian Faderman and Ann Williams, “Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Image,” *Conditions*, (April, 1977), 32.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education*, (New Haven, 1985), 63.

had made it something of a fad.”<sup>45</sup> An eminent sexologist of the period, George Henry, similarly asserted that “the bravado of talk [about lesbianism] among female college students, which was in evidence ten to fifteen years ago, seems to have measurably abated, and with this diminution, the [sexual] experimentation seems to have lessened, or proved little rewarding.”<sup>46</sup>

Some women however, continued to use heterosexual marriages as a front for their lesbian relationships. In 1935, Henry organized a study of “socially well-adjusted” mostly middle class white and black “sex variants.” He found that a large number of the women studied were married to men while they engaged in their lesbian affairs. In fact, many of these women ended up marrying men while also admitting that they had acted upon emotional and physical love for other women.<sup>47</sup>

In some areas during the Depression, like Chicago, there were even “fairly lively” lesbian subcultures dominated by working-class women.<sup>48</sup> In San Francisco there was an all-women’s bar called Mona’s, which opened in the mid-1930s and frequented younger working-class women. These women often openly identified as lesbians or were “in the life” as the 1930s bar phrase described it. A late 1930s study entitled “The Language of Homosexuality” noted many terms used by lesbians to identify themselves during the decade. These included “dyke,” “bulldyke,” “bulldagger,” “gay,” “drag” which had also been popular in the 1920s, along with new terms like “queer bird” and “lavender.” Many other slang terms described butch/femme relationships like “jockey” and “poppa” in reference to more masculine-presenting women “butches”, and “mamma” and “wife” for the more feminine-presenting “femmes.”<sup>49</sup> These

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<sup>45</sup> Dorothy Bromley and Florence Britten, *Youth and Sex: A Study of 1300 College Students*, (New York, 1938), 118.

<sup>46</sup> George W. Henry, *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patters*, (New York, 1941), 1070.

<sup>47</sup> George Henry, “Psychogenic Factors in Overt Homosexuality,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, (January 1937), 889-908.

<sup>48</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Gershon Legman, “The Language of Homosexuality,” (1941) in appendix of Henry, *Sex Variants*.

women frequently met each other through secret clubs like the Nucleus Club in New York or gatherings where gay men and lesbians used each other as heterosexual partners or “beards.”<sup>50</sup> Other middle class lesbians had the possibility of meeting one another as they had in the past in all-women institutions like summer camps, colleges, and residence halls. Even within these institutions and bars however, women were cautious and a code of silence still pervaded.

One poignant personal story particularly embodied the contradictory nature of the 1930s for women who loved women. In an article entitled “Flight from Slander,” the author Marion Joyce described her experience of confronting the societal transition from the accepted female friendship to the danger and damage of lesbianism. Joyce recounted her childhood experience, claiming that she was “born with the belief that between two women there might be sincere affection and sympathetic understanding, the symbols of real friendships.” Same-sex attachments during school were not only unquestioned but revered and admired. It was not until she turned 18, that she said this changed. These once glorified friendships were now made shameful. “Public opinion, formed by cheap medical reprints and tabloid gossip, dubbed such contacts perverted, called such women Lesbians, such affection and understanding destructive.” In this context, all close female friendships became suspect.<sup>51</sup>

In the following years of her life, Joyce was forced into isolation due to her branding as a female invert. These accusations were based solely on the facts that she earned her own living, and had more masculine traits like a deep voice, large hands, and a tall stature. Joyce claimed that women could no longer send letters to one another, express deep affection, or live together without “avoid[ing] slander.” Joyce herself was sent to a doctor who interrogated her personal life and mental health with questions rooted in Freudian psychology. The doctor decided that she

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<sup>50</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Marion Joyce, “Flight from Slander,” *Forum and Century (1930-1940)*, (August, 1938), *American Periodicals*, 90.

was a woman “who must be made over if she were to be of value.” Joyce consequently ran away and for 30 years she resided in seclusion, the only manner she could ultimately avoid the everlasting allegations of sexual perversion. Joyce ended her anecdote by pleading to her readers, “Must I strip my body to prove I am a normal woman? What more can I do than strip my soul naked in an attempt to protect other innocent individuals who, like myself, refuse much that would be of service to humanity because that same humanity will not let them be normal?”<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Joyce’s character and ultimately her life were completely destroyed because of society’s fear of lesbianism and their labeling of her as a sexual pervert. Joyce’s story highlights the societal shift from the presumption of and reverence for platonic friendship to the assumption of and antipathy for “perversion” for a subset of women, a change that only occurred in just a few decades.

As Joyce’s story shows, women who loved women rarely identified themselves as lesbians in the 1930s. Most of them married where they were isolated from other women as they lived in their husband’s homes. As a result, many of these women either abandoned their same-sex desires or engaged in sporadic affairs with other women. Furthermore, even though the number of workingwomen increased during this period, most of these women were forced to make do with low paying, menial jobs that demanded a second source of income. Consequently, since they could not finance themselves independently, many women settled into heterosexual marriages and compromised their same-sex desires for economic security.<sup>53</sup>

As George Henry’s study found, some women did use heterosexual marriages as a front to pursue their relationships with women, and many others were in these heterosexual marriages because they were legitimately bisexual. However, economic concerns and worries of losing

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 95.

respectability, combined with growing disapproval of lesbianism, forced most women who loved women into silence. The admiration for female friendship and the freedom that many women enjoyed in pursuing relationships with other women that was present in the reform-minded Progressive Era had all but faded away by the outbreak of World War II. Women who loved women during the 1930s “were not in the position to stick up for themselves and challenge such stereotypes, since self-defense by so small a minority would have done little but expose them to hostility, disdain, or at best, pity.”<sup>54</sup> As Faderman argues, the 1930s “discouraged such nonconformity on any social level,” requiring that whatever advances had been made for women who loved women in the decades before be put on hold until the times changed.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>55</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 99.



## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to track the evolution of romantic female friendships and the development of a lesbian identity from the Progressive Era to World War II, approximately 1890-1939. Women who loved women and their relationships with one another were intricately connected to cultural patterns in women's institutions of higher learning, changing discourses of sexuality, and the gradual development of lesbianism as a sexual identity.

The path from Victorian Era female friendships to the contemporary lesbian identity we know today did not occur in a linear fashion. Instead, these relationships constantly vacillated in response to the creation of new identity categories, the eruption of national events, and the fluctuation of public opinion and social discourses. In many respects, the reverence for female intimacy that permeated the late nineteenth century allowed for same-sex female relationships to go unquestioned. Scholars typically associate this period with sexual repression, but this was not the case. Women's colleges and the Progressive reform movements provided women with the opportunity to form relationships and solidarity networks with one another.

The first two decades of the twentieth century however, began to erode the veneration of female friendships. Sexologists like Havelock Ellis sought to separate the sexually deviant from the sexually moral, creating the concept of the female sexual invert. As a result, sexologists started to investigate deviant elements in women's homosocial institutions, forcing women who loved women to hide and defend their friendships with other women.

The 1920s on the contrary, were a dichotomous period for same-sex female relationships. On one hand, bohemian culture gave rise to bisexual experimentation and lesbianism as a stylish but temporary fad. On the other hand, a new focus on companionate marriage among the middle and upper class established heterosexual fulfillment as the requirement for female contentment.

Consequently, even though more women were experimenting with same-sex female love, the majority of women who loved women were ultimately pressured to engross themselves in heterosexual commitment.

Finally, the 1930s witnessed the amalgamation of sexology and psychoanalysis, with female sexual inversion labeled as a pitiful mental illness. News media as well as theater, literature and magazines increasingly broached the topic of female inversion, bringing it firmly into the public eye. In this context, many women who loved women were forced into heterosexual marriages, either for economic security or for fear of being branded a deviant. Some women who loved women however did continue their relationships with other women under the guise of heterosexual marriage or if brave enough, joined the budding lesbian subculture.

This thesis also sought to demonstrate that countless women were involved in romantic and sexual relationships with other women before World War II, many of them prominent historical figures. These relationships were documented in personal letters, diaries, newspaper and magazine articles, university records, as well as medical and psychological reports. It is easy to overlook these sources and the women involved. The primary focus of sexual history has been placed on the post-World War II era, but it is impossible to fully understand that period and the emergence of lesbianism as a political identity without placing it in earlier historical context.

Women like Mary Dreier who engaged in a lifelong relationship with her female partner and fellow reformer Frances Kellor while also committing herself to Progressive Era and New Deal politics, set the groundwork for later political and feminist lesbians. Writer Edna St. Vincent Millay as well as social worker Ruth Mellor who were involved in relationships with both men and women provided a successful precedent for later lesbian and bisexual writers and activists. Studies on the sexuality of women such as those of Katherine Bement Davis and

George Henry laid the foundation for groundbreaking reports like Alfred Kinsey's studies during the mid-twentieth century. The novel *The Well of Loneliness* and the play "The Children's Hour" inspired future lesbian and bisexual works of popular culture. Without knowledge of these women, their accomplishments, and the social and institutional discourses that impacted them, we miss an integral part of our sexual history. As a result, in moving forward, as both historians and members of society, it is our obligation to learn about our historical past and relay these untold stories of women who loved women.

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