

2014

# Southern Sapphisms: Sexuality and Sociality in Literary Productions, 1974-1997

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SOUTHERN SAPPHISMS: SEXUALITY AND SOCIALITY IN  
LITERARY PRODUCTIONS, 1974-1997

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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August 2014

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To Chris, the best.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people who deserve recognition and gratitude; thanking them all is a damn near impossible task. At Louisiana State University, I wish to distinguish my dissertation committee. Its chair, Katherine Henninger, was an exceptionally committed reader. I am deeply indebted to her. She provided me with the countless comments and provocations that gave unparalleled shape and direction to *Southern Sapphisms*. More than that, she imparted and instilled in me a strong sense of the import of articulating my scholarly identity, and what that truly means for my writing and career.

Benjamin Kahan has encouraged this research from the very beginning, offering generous and steadfast support throughout. Without his renowned guidance, I would be far less skilled in nearly every genre of academic writing: from seminar papers and library fellowship applications to job letters to book proposals. Thank you, Benjy.

Michael Bibler, the Southern Sexuality Studies Scholar, was a part of my thinking for this project long before he ever arrived at LSU. Michael Bibler, the Southern Sexuality Studies Scholar *and* Mentor, epitomizes the kind of all-star professor that I aspire to be. I don't know if I'll ever be able to shake my inner fan girl around him and/or his cats.

Finally, for her sustaining advice on how to navigate the profession with purpose and poise, and for her unique, invaluable ability to talk me down from the rafters, I wish to thank Elsie Michie.

In the Department of English at Louisiana State University, I also wish to mention Dan Novak and Pallavi Rastogi: both graciously devoted time and energy on my behalf at

various points in my academic career. From the graduate cohort, Michael Griffin, Laura Jones, and Amanda Wicks deserve recognition here—they were my office mates, carpool buddies, and writing group members. Socially, and certainly, there are many cherished departmental colleagues who should be included here. Of these, I am glad for Stephanie Osburn Krassenstein. She is my best friend, and I say that with equal amounts of hubris and humility.

I'm especially grateful to students from my summer 2012 "Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction," and spring 2013 "Lesbian Writers, Lesbian Writing," classes for challenging my thinking both within and beyond the classroom. At the time, these courses validated my dissertation project—and by extension, my own identity as a scholar—both in terms of my knowledge of the field and my passionate commitment to and belief in the original contribution I could make to it. Looking back, I realize now that the opportunity to teach the texts I examined in my dissertation really afforded me the time and space to think through them in a variety of ways, and I am grateful to the department administrative faculty and staff who approved and made those courses possible.

At Cornell University, I am grateful to Brenda J. Marston, Curator of the Human Sexuality Collection and Head of Research Services in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Kroch Library. Her belief in this work and a Zwickler Fellowship at the HSC enabled the archival research that eventually comprised chapter two. Additionally, an aside suggestion from her provided the inspiration for my next project and my editorial relationship with Amy Stone at Trinity University.

I am honored to be the youngest of a long history of strong, southern women from

my family. My Mawmaw, my mother, and my sister raised me; Kelly spoils me still. They are my strongest allies, my loyal protectors, and my unconditional champions. Thank you for reminding me to be brave.

I could not have done this without the other women in my life who I have loved: Kirsten Peltier, founder of my life committee and still, to this day, the most capable woman I have ever known; Erica Titkemeyer, preserver of seashells and buckeyes, collector of wishful pennies and eyelashes; and Lizeth Martinez, who taught me to believe the word *hermosa*. If we'd had three hearts like an octopus, could we have loved more fearlessly, more fiercely?

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## ABSTRACT

*Southern Sapphisms: Sexuality and Sociality in Literary Productions, 1974-1997*, considers how queer and feminist theories illuminate and complicate the intersections between canonical and obscure, queer and normative, and regional and national narratives in southern literary representations produced during a crucial but understudied period in the historical politicization of sexuality. The advent of New Southern Studies—and its nascent emphasis on sexuality as an organizing principle of social relations—has focused almost exclusively on midcentury texts from the Southern Renaissance, largely neglecting post-1970 queer literatures. At the same time, despite these developments in southern studies, most scholarship in women’s and feminist studies continue to ignore the South, or worse, demonize the South as backward, parochial, and deeply homophobic. My dissertation redresses these scholarly lacunae with the first book-length study devoted to southern lesbian literary productions across multiple genres, including fiction, small press newspapers, poetry, plays, and cinematic representations. Analyzing works by some of the most prominent names in American women’s writing and feminist politics since the 1970s, including Dorothy Allison, Blanche McCrary Boyd, Jane Chambers, Doris Davenport, Fannie Flagg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Shay Youngblood, and the editors of *Feminary*, this project argues that late twentieth-century southern lesbian writings not only reveal, but also worked at the cutting edge to drive virtually all the major shifts in the discourses and theoretical underpinnings of sexuality studies and in lesbian and gay politics and culture in the nation. Many of the women fighting on the national level for women’s liberation and what we now call LGBTQ rights have either hailed from the

South, spent long periods of their lives in the South, or settled in the South. Through both surface and close reading techniques, *Southern Sapphisms* argues that we cannot understand expressions of lesbianism and feminism in post-Stonewall era American literature without also understanding the explicitly southern dynamics of those writings—foregrounding the centrality of sexuality to the study of southern literature as well as the region’s defining role in the historiography of lesbian literature in the United States.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, a generation of writers came of age in the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation movements—but what many activists and scholars fail to notice is that a significant number of women on the cutting edge of these social advancements were not only from the South, but were also emphatically southern in their writing and thinking. These women forged a legacy of rich and varied literary productions spanning the following two decades, building lesbian community both in the region and in the nation. While southern literary studies has recently seen an influx of critical perspectives interrogating texts for homosexual and/or queer readings as rich sites for explorations in regional identity, those important inroads have focused almost exclusively on midcentury texts from the Southern Renaissance, largely neglecting what is arguably the most significant period in lesbian literary production to date.

Explicit representations of lesbians emerged in southern literary productions during a key transitional period in American social justice movements. As the fights for women's liberation, civil rights, and the emergence of the homophile movement coalesced in the United States, feminism became the theory and lesbianism the practice for women rallying across regional and national levels. Lesbian feminism imagines sexuality and sex acts or practices as having a unique political context, one that has the potential to be radical.<sup>1</sup> While many of these women writers made lesbianism an explicit literary theme, they also made southern culture and southern community central to the critical and political perspectives of their works. This project argues that we cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) 152.

understand expressions of lesbianism and feminism in post-1970s American literature without also understanding the explicitly southern dynamics of those writings.

*Southern Sapphisms: Sexuality and Sociality in Literary Productions 1974-1997*, redresses a scholarly lacuna by examining southern lesbian literary representations produced during an era of marked significance for the historical politicization of queer sexualities in the U.S. I train my attention on the period between 1974—a year of increased lesbian literary circulations, activist momentum, and visible community assertions—and 1997, the year John Howard’s *Carryin’ On in The Gay and Lesbian South* transformed scholarship on southern sexuality studies by foregrounding the intersections between southernness and non-normative sexualities.

By focusing on lesbian literary productions across genres of fiction, journalism, poetry, and drama, *Southern Sapphisms* aims to open up critical conversations surrounding literary productions from this key transitional moment in ways that challenge both regional and queer literary histories. My goal, however, is neither to claim that lesbian literary production in the South is somehow different from that originating elsewhere nor, conversely, to argue that most lesbian representation after Stonewall is secretly, intrinsically southern. Rather, through both surface and close reading techniques, my work reveals how southern sapphisms from the 1970s to the 1990s not only contributed to, but often spearheaded wider cultural shifts in the representation and deployment of sexuality—from the mid-century trope of the “open secret” to post-1960s liberationist discourse to poststructuralist models of identity theorized from the 1980s onward—ultimately foregrounding the centrality of sexuality to the study of southern

literature as well as the region's defining role in the historiography of lesbian literature in the post-Stonewall United States.

When I say queer, I mean queer—as Michael Warner means queer—to be critically against the normal, and not solely in opposition to the heterosexual.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, David Halperin, in *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* writes, “queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.”<sup>3</sup> Queer might include “all those whose sexual identifications are not considered normal or sanctioned” indeed, it suggests, “an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality.”<sup>4</sup> Queer need not necessarily indicate a gendered or sexuality-focused lens, though; Eve Sedgwick has praised work that “spins outward” to include other identity shaping and fracturing discourses.<sup>5</sup> In one sense, the value of my approach here narrows the critical conversation from the notion of queer—which often unintentionally buries lesbian productions and sociality—even as it semantically broadens literary “productions” in the textual conversation to encompass producers and process. The term “southern sapphism” retains the expansiveness of “queer,” yet emphasizes the specificity of women-centered sexualities and lesbian

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<sup>2</sup> *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 62.

<sup>4</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Tendencies* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 8-9.

identities—a crucial move when so many uses of “queer” implicitly retain a masculine (and white and middle-class) bias.

When I use the term queer in this project I do so carefully, because I’m aware of the ways in which gender, race, and class intersect to render identities not solely constructed by sexuality, although not completely outside of it. This is in part what Gary Richards refers to in his use of “sexual otherness,” or a “broader set of sexual markers, expressions, and acts—those that are as integrally contingent upon sex, gender, race, and class as object choice.”<sup>6</sup> While Richards remains uneasy with the term queer for its binary reinforcement, I believe the term southern sapphisms enables the type of broad depth work that Sedgwick calls us to do while neither sacrificing questions of normativity nor eliding a grounding in sexuality. Instead of separating sexuality as a category to be studied on its own, my work demonstrates how sexuality works as the entry-point to understanding the wider web of connections between gender, race, class, politics, and culture. However, I assert that the writers I analyze remain centrally interested in a transition from sexual otherness to sexual belonging, and that the literature these writers produce foregrounds and re-inscribes these shifting tensions from non-normative to new normative (but not necessarily normalizing) ideas of community building.

It is in the spirit of this capacious narrowness that I have chosen my title. Sapphism is a coinage of the root word Sapphic, a term commonly synonymous with “lesbian.” As Leila J. Rupp states, however, “the term *Sapphic* has a longer and more widespread history than *lesbian*” and is preceded by tribadism, “the only term that has a

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<sup>6</sup> *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) 2.

broader historical reach, if not the same poetics.”<sup>7</sup> I mean to embrace the wider reach and poetics of sapphisms not only to honor the historical depth of specifically woman-to-woman sexual desire, but also to reflect the breadth of literary productions I examine here, particularly how these works combine to produce certain community-building effects on the reader. Similarly, I offer the suffix –ism to extend what has to date been the focus of queer literary analysis beyond products (mostly novels), to include literary production as an action or condition. Southern sapphisms are productions, acts done, or conditions of productions and acts. The southern sapphisms analyzed in this project are primarily literary in form, although lesbian literary productions are by no means the only form of production; a southern sapphism might also refer to a performance, dance, work of art, saying, expression, or interaction. The southern sapphisms I explore here—lesbian writings, histories, and sociality—are too often buried, ignored, or sensationalized in southern cultural and literary criticism focusing on a broader concept of queer sexuality in the South. But such elisions cut two ways: these southern sapphisms are also too often subsumed in homogenized accounts of lesbianism and within second wave feminisms that ignore the southern roots and regional expressions of women writing on the forefront of the movement.

This is not solely a regional issue: the term lesbian is overwhelmingly fused and/or buried under the terms “queer” or “gay” in academia.<sup>8</sup> This critical dislocation is

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<sup>7</sup> *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 1.

<sup>8</sup> See Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). In her construction of the apparitional lesbian, Castle specifically critiques the veiling of “lesbian” within critical scholarship and discourse, writing, “presenting ‘The Apparitional Lesbian’ to various



directly antithetical to the letter and spirit of the works and women who boldly claimed visibility at a time when such identity assertions were emergent and under threat.

Problems of definition have also plagued lesbian literary criticism, where a range of approaches exists that are both fruitful and troubling. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman defines lesbianism as “a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other,” while Martha Vicinus’ study *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women 1778-1928* moves beyond emotions and bonds to argue for the importance of sexuality in determining a “lesbian” history.<sup>9</sup> These discussions expose the danger in lumping desire, sex, relationships, acts, behaviors, and experiences into a singular category—even as they highlight the difficulties in pinpointing “what qualifies a woman as a lesbian throughout history and across cultures.”<sup>10</sup> Where to draw the lines inevitably includes a discussion of sex: what physically counts as sex between women, the degree of importance sex plays in qualifying a woman as a lesbian, and of course, how lesbians have sex. These questions

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scholarly audiences over the past year, I could not help but notice how often the first question I would receive after delivering my talk was “But what about gay men?” or some version thereof—as though I had implicitly committed an offense against good manners by daring to speak of lesbianism without mentioning male homosexuality. Even among sophisticated and open-minded listeners, it was extremely difficult, I found, to keep the lesbian focus—so strong the collective reflex to shift back to the topic of love between men, as if that, paradoxically, were somehow less peculiar or less threatening than the love between women” (12).

<sup>9</sup> *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1998), 17. Medieval historian Judith Bennett argues for the term *lesbian-like*, recognizing issue in utilizing contemporary terms and understandings to describe women’s suggestive desires and behaviors from the past; unlike Bennett, I am studying contemporary work well aware of circulating notions of lesbian identity.

<sup>10</sup> Rupp, *Sapphistries* 2.

have uncertain and tricky answers—alongside the multitude of implications sexuality raises in constructing any identity.

By differentiating between female homo-sociality and female same-sex sexual behaviors and acts we build more flexible, nuanced, and sensitive understandings of the relationalities between women’s homo-sociality, women’s desires, and women’s desire for other women. Published thirty years ago, Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence” is one of the founding perspectives in the field(s) of lesbian (and gay) studies. Theorizing heterosexuality as a political institution, Rich destabilizes women’s presumed preference for men as a supposed natural phenomenon. “Moreover,” Rich asserts, “it is understood that [heterosexual] ‘preference’ does not need to be explained, unless through the tortuous theory of the female Oedipus complex or the necessity for species reproduction. It is lesbian sexuality that is seen as requiring explanation.”<sup>11</sup> This assumption is rarely challenged under a socially structuring system of heteronormative pressures, and can be increasingly difficult to articulate without a counter-historical narrative of lesbian existence, or “the breaking of taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life.”<sup>12</sup> Rich introduces the lesbian continuum—an expansion of women-identified experiences—in an effort to bridge the erotic and the social (companionship, amity, camaraderie, friendship, sisterhood) as epistemological tools for extending how we define the lesbian existence:

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<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Anne Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983) 182.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—throughout each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life...the giving and receiving of practical and political support...we begin to grasp the breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of lesbianism...<sup>13</sup>

There are sites of potentiality and limitation in Rich’s argument, as in effect, women are “moving in and out of this continuum whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not.”<sup>14</sup>

While broadening our understanding of women’s experiences with one another serves to challenge compulsory heterosexuality and resist male domination, her concept rests on a rise of the social under “the erotic in female terms:” a non-corporeal omnipresent female specific energy.<sup>15</sup> Any woman-to-woman identified relationship or experience then becomes de-sexualized and sublimated under a uniquely female use of the erotic. Such a shift away from the body contradicts what Rich later asserts is “*central* to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality that has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience.”<sup>16</sup>

This erotic sensuality is not containable within the realm of joy, survival, community, bonding, or other women-identified emotions and relationships, but in the “*physical* passion of women for women.”<sup>17</sup> By privileging physical sexuality as central to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 195 (my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 195 (my emphasis).

lesbian existence and the most marginalized of female experiences, Rich threatens to limit her own definition of lesbian continuum, often articulated through the power of the erotic, “that resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.”<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the dangers of encompassing all female experiences into the lesbian existence might, in the end, limit woman-to-woman desire, eroticism, and passion by reductively blurring the distinctions between lesbian identity, female-centered identity, female-bodied individuals who may not consider themselves women or men, or those individuals who may fall someplace on or beyond a gender and sex continuum. In effect, we must both embrace and divorce definitions of lesbian and the lesbian continuum from their political and metaphoric meanings, or run the risk of erasing female desire from the term “lesbian” in favor of focus exclusively on the close non-physical/erotic bonds between women.

Teresa deLauretis in *The Practice of Love* locates a definition of lesbian within what she calls a “conscious presence of desire” grounded in “a sexual relation...for better or worse...”<sup>19</sup> This exclusive treatment of lesbian, while more embracing of physical desire and corporeality than Rich’s inclusive definition, de-emphasizes interconnections and bonding experiences between women:

Whatever other affective or social ties may be involved in a lesbian relationship—ties that may also exist in other relations between and among women, from friendship to rivalry, political sisterhood to class or racial antagonism, ambivalence to love and so on—the term lesbian refers

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<sup>18</sup> Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (New York: Kore Press, 2000) 2.

<sup>19</sup> *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 284.

to a sexual relation, for better or for worse, and however broadly one might wish to define sexual. I use this term...to include centrally—beyond any performed or fantasized sexual act, whatever it may be—the conscious presence of desire in one woman for another.<sup>20</sup>

The southern sapphisms explored here incorporate a both/and approach to the definitional positions outlined above; while DeLauretis and Rich land on opposite ends of the debate on physical supremacy, the discussions that follow neither privilege the Sapphic possibilities open to all women who undergo the homo-relations of wanting, eroticism, and befriending nor elide the too often decentered position consummated desire and sexual relations take. However, this project strongly asserts that sex matters; that acts, eroticism, and passion/desire centrally inform southern sapphisms and their legacies, and that the literary productions examined here think of sexuality as having great importance in the representation of hypervisible lesbian identities.

Moving then from a discussion of lesbian women to lesbian literary productions, this project argues that the representational figure of the lesbian is a persuasive category for southern literature, and that lesbian literature is more than an amorphous genre. The development of a specifically lesbian literary perspective begs a similar question, what is a lesbian text? To answer this, I first turn to Barbara Smith's definition: "If in a woman writer's work a sentence refuses what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature."<sup>21</sup> Such a description, one seemingly more focused on form and technique—the basis of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. (New York: Feminist Press, 1972) 157.

literary production—not only raises problematic questions of essentialism, but fails to account for any physicality, whether it be desire, eroticism, or sex. Terry Castle writes that lesbian fiction “is likely to be an underread, even unknown, text—and certainly an underappreciated one...but, most importantly, by plotting against what Eve Sedgwick has called the ‘plot of male homosociality,’ the archetypal lesbian fiction decanonizes, so to speak, the canonical nature of desire itself.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, to answer the question of what is a lesbian text, there must be a fuller determination of 1) how those definitions relate to American literature and sociality more generally, as well as 2) how those definitions relate to southern literary productions more specifically.

Bonnie Zimmerman notes that difficulties in definition have “been exacerbated by the problem of silence” and that lesbian feminist literary criticism “begins with the establishment of lesbian text: the creation of language out of silence.”<sup>23</sup> How we define “lesbian” influences what we consider to be lesbian texts; identifying southern lesbian authors and southern lesbian literary production contributes to an ongoing critical recovery of literary productions that “explore the connections between *seeing* the world differently and *making* it different.”<sup>24</sup> We cannot understand these “lesbian texts” yet because southern contexts and themes in these works have not been fully explored in relation to sexuality.

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<sup>22</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 90.

<sup>23</sup> “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism.” *Feminist Studies*. 7.1 (1981): 58-9.

<sup>24</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985) 117.

This problem of silence has further lent itself to the amorphous construction of a lesbian canon within American literature, one even less formulated within the southern literary canon. Although Jane Rule's *Literary Women*, Jeanette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography*, and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* have attempted to trace a lesbian literary tradition in American literature—intent on exploring the lesbian perspective and creative works brought to fruition from it—the relationship of “[lesbian and] gay studies to debates on the literary canon” remains at best, “tortuous.”<sup>25</sup> The effort to valiantly categorize and define lesbian literature has been undertaken by critics and writers alike—by interrogating narrative models, attempting to trace a lesbian aesthetic or sensibility in literature, or suggesting the supremacy of powerfully feminist principles.<sup>26</sup>

To borrow from Mab Segrest, “So what does all this have to do with Southern literature? Potentially, a lot.”<sup>27</sup> Southern lesbian writers of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate varied representations of the nexus formed between lesbian sexuality and southern identity—race and class intersect in a complex web of identity politics. Writers including Barbara Smith, Lorraine Bethel, Elaine Dykewoman, June Arnold, Jane Chambers, Rita Mae Brown, Doris Davenport, Sally Gearhart, Bertha Harris, Florence King, and other lesbian writers with Southern roots produced literature documenting

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<sup>25</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 148.

<sup>26</sup> See Catharine Stimpson's “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” in *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982), Bertha Harris' “What We mean to Say: Notes Toward Defining the Nature of Lesbian Literature,” in *Heresies* (1977), and Bonnie Zimmerman's “What Has Never Been” (1981). It is immensely important to note that these scholars offer a vision of American lesbian literature that leaves the South out of it.

<sup>27</sup> *My Mama's Dead Squirrel*, 103.

lesbian presence and influence in the world, and their literature in turn, nurtured, shaped, and sustained a southern community that engaged national-level lesbian feminist issues through their writings. Therefore I am deeply invested in adjusting the lenses of both sexuality studies and southern literary criticism and by focusing on those literary productions and structures of lesbian sociality—southern sapphisms—that these writers have made so germane in their works.

Regardless of genre, all of the works examined here share three fundamental similarities. First, each author is a woman with a geographic affinity to the South—she may have been born in, lived a short or long amount of time in, or even vacated from the region. Second, lesbian sexuality is a powerful theme within the text. The author may or may not identify as a lesbian, but characters or subjects do represent lesbian sexuality. And third, in keeping with what I will argue was the crucial impulse of my timeframe, each work bridges regional and sexual identities to build varied and multi-faceted systems of community. Combined, the explorations between southern regional identity, lesbian sexual identity, and the shapes and meanings of southern lesbian sociality constitute the selected body of work to which southern sapphisms refers. The writers included in my study told extraordinary stories, and they have only begun to be read.

### **Mapping the Critical Field**

Recent scholarly conversations have produced diverse and engaging reassessments of space and place in relation to queer identities. Those reassessments might be, for example, institutional, as Michael Bibler has demonstrated through his conceptualization of the southern plantation as a fundamentally queer space in Cotton's



Queer Relations (2009); historical, as in Brock Thompson's recent book *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (2010); or geographical, as evidenced by John Howard's Mississippi study, *Men Like That* (1997). Other publications, including Mab Segrest's *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture*, and E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008), have drawn from oral narratives of sexual and racial identity to structure queer sociality in the south. A similar turn has occurred in the regional conference circuit; "the first-of-its-kind" conference, titled "Queering the South: A Gathering of LBGT Arts, Activists, and Academics" took place at Emory University in 1997, while more recent panels for the 2011 South Central Modern Language Association, the 2012 Society for the Study of Southern Literature, and the 2013 Modern Language Association conferences invited papers that take stock of recent trends in gay and lesbian southern literature and related issues of canonicity.<sup>28</sup>

Mississippi native John Howard emerged as an authority in southern sexuality studies with his research on the intersections between queer identities and southernness; according to Howard, the "three r's," race, religion, and rurality hold a central place in structuring these two identities.<sup>29</sup> Essays in Howard's anthology *Carryin' On* provide the first framework and parameters for southern sexuality studies as a field, even as they struggle to negotiate complicated intersections found between regional exceptionalism and extreme sexual alterity.

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<sup>28</sup> Carlos Dews and Carolyn Law, *Out in the South*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Carryin' On in the Gay and Lesbian South*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 9.

As Donna Jo Smith writes in her contribution to *Carryin' On*, “to best illuminate southern queer experiences, we must leave open questions of identity, both queer and southern, and explore how out subjects have negotiated their same-sex desire within this region and how that experience has been mediated by complex, intersecting identities.”<sup>30</sup> Smith’s formulation usefully counters historical tendencies toward essentialism: the idea that everyone expresses, embodies, appears, performs, or experiences their (homo) sexuality and their southernness in a visible, coherent, and analogous manner. The reality is, of course, not so. Shifting our questioning from “what is lesbian?” and “what is southern?” to “how are the two same/different/intersecting?” allows for the possibilities and potentialities found in examining how individuals—including southern writers and the characters they portray—come to terms with and understand how wider identities and social structures shape and influence southern lesbian experiences.

Just because lesbian Southerners can be massed together on the basis of shared identity in terms of sexuality and region does not necessarily mean that any easy definitions or group conclusions may be drawn, either culturally or textually. And yet, lesbians from the South are perceived within these seemingly symbolic structures, all but embodying a problematic specialness that cannot be evaded in circulating preconceived notions of the southern lesbian—no matter how much scholars would like to avoid perpetuating this in discourse. My purpose here is neither to impose that same exceptionalist rhetoric on my readings of southern sapphisms, nor to suggest that sexuality and southernness are experienced or represented in a uniform manner. Rather, I

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<sup>30</sup> “Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity,” *Carryin' On in the Gay and Lesbian South*, John Howard, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 382.

want to foreground in my work the expansive array of intersecting identity representations that are, in fact, surfaced by these southern sapphisms.

While Howard's anthology remains germane to bookmarking the rise of southern sexuality studies in the academy, its framework focuses more on historicity than literary interpretations.<sup>31</sup> Until Bibler's publication of *Cotton's Queer Relations* in 2009, Gary Richards's groundbreaking *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961* occupied a lonely but groundbreaking place: the only book-length analysis on representations of same-sex desire in southern literature.<sup>32</sup> Richards examines the work of six mid-century southern writers: Truman Capote, William Goyen, Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Harper Lee, and Carson McCullers. While this group is markedly different in terms of identities, the "fiction of these writers shares at least two preoccupations: representing the South and representing sexual otherness."<sup>33</sup> Richards is careful to point out that while these authors neither represent the South nor sexual otherness across their entire oeuvre, same-sex desires and homo-sociality are depicted in some novels, including Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), and her novellas, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *The*

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<sup>31</sup> Two of the fifteen chapters deal exclusively with literary analysis; the works of William Alexander Percy and Lillian Smith are its subjects.

<sup>32</sup> See James T. Sears' trailblazing books, *Growing Up Gay In the South* (New York: Routledge 1991), *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1969* (New York: Basic Books 1998), and *Rebels, Rubyfruit and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 2001) for discussions of queer life in the South beyond southern literary productions. These texts explore queer experiences through surveys of social history and culture—interweaving personal biographies and oral histories.

<sup>33</sup> *Lovers and Beloveds*, 3.

*Ballad of Sad Cafe* (1943), Goyen's *The House of Breath* (1950), Wright's *The Long Dream* (1958), and Smith's *Strange Fruit* (1944).

According to Richards, the Southern Renaissance canon reflects a fixation, if not a complete fascination with representations of same-sex desire.<sup>34</sup> Although the Nashville Agrarians and the New Critics were conspicuously silent on issues of same-sex desire, they peripherally regarded writers and works emphasizing non-normative sexualities as irritating yet unavoidable nuisances. Built on the foundations of the patriarchal family and tenets of Christianity, the Agrarian South had little use or tolerance for literary productions that threatened the cohesiveness of social order. In turn, by their methodology alone, the New Critics largely delegitimized same-sex writers and writing—insisting on a structured, apolitical formal analysis instead. “Thus,” Richards elucidates, “when considered strictly as literary theory and distanced from particular practitioners, the New Criticism cannot necessarily be labeled as homophobic, even if to maintain such a distance is more easily said than done and thus betrays the difficulty of the task of practitioners.”<sup>35</sup> Writers who asserted same-sex intimacy/non-heteronormativity (for the Agrarians) or homosexual identity (for the New Critics) were marginalized. But when Tennessee Williams won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948 for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and again in 1955 for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the Agrarians and New Critics could no longer deny representations of same-sex desire in Southern literature. They could, instead, “declare the Renaissance over at precisely the moment when southern writers were increasingly and more explicitly representing

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13.

homosexuality,” neatly demarcating same-sex desire distinctly outside the golden age of mid-century Southern literary production.<sup>36</sup> Exemplified by the South, regionalism began to take hold in the national imagination; before Williams, Southern literature was generally viewed as inescapably gothic, perverse, and deviant. This is due in part to diachronic regional rhetoric where homosexuality was largely quarantined to the South and normalcy to the North, as Richards notes, “sexual otherness is always *their* problem, *their* preoccupation, *their* identity, and *not* ours. Look, see; *their* literature proves it.”<sup>37</sup> In an earlier version of the introduction to *Lovers and Beloveds* titled “‘With a Special Emphasis:’ The Dynamics of (Re)Claiming a Queer Southern Renaissance,” Richards writes that queer characters have been quarantined to the South, casting the region as a container of homosexual desire. He contends, “the quarantining of homosexuality to the South in the popular national imagination dictated to some degree that the region’s writers must represent sexual otherness...”<sup>38</sup> Container ideology allowed Southern writers including William Alexander Percy, Lillian Hellman, Katherine Anne Porter, Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, Harper Lee, and Hubert Creekmore the freedom to explore and depict queer desires subversively. These shifts weren’t crippling to Southern writers exploring sexual otherness—they were invitations.

While Richards is specifically concerned with illuminating the adroitness with which these authors represent same-sex desire and southern identity in specific texts, his analysis practices a complex inclusion. By refusing to separate or divorce sexualities

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

from a web of identity ingredients—race, class, gender—including incest, rape, miscegenation, and misogyny, Richards’ research epistemology echoes Donna Jo Smith’s assertions that a more full bodied, nuanced discussion of homosexuality and southernness depends upon addressing and privileging the varied “elements crucial to the constitution of identity” as “always in relation to one another.”<sup>39</sup>

In *Cotton’s Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*, Bibler tempts readers to negotiate sexual otherness in the South within what he reads as “an intrinsically queer cultural space”: the plantation.<sup>40</sup> Bibler’s astute analyses of nine chosen texts illuminate the diverse sexual identities at home in the Southern plantation. His wide-ranging study seeks to heighten our awareness of the ways in which Southern writers including William Faulkner, Lillian Hellman, and Arna Bontemps actively engaged with homosocial, homoerotic, and/or homosexual intimacy in their writings for the purposes of conceptualizing social equality. By resisting straight and/or narrow literary interpretations of plantation mythology, Bibler bores deeply into the myth of the South to queer its content.<sup>41</sup>

Bibler’s theoretical approach is heavily indebted to Leo Bersani’s model of “homo-ness,” or the privileging of sameness. Bibler uses “homo-ness”<sup>42</sup> in reference to

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Cotton’s Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*, (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2009) 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Here I am using homo- to denote neither a sexual act, nor series of behaviors, practices, or desires, but instead a repeated and shared performance of same differentness--one that not everyone shares in the same ways. See Leo Bersani’s formulation of homo-ness in *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

“the effect produced when sexual sameness supersedes all other factors of identity categories to establish, however provisionally, an egalitarian social bond between individuals.”<sup>43</sup> Whereas “sameness” functions to unite two people on the basis of shared identity categories, “homo-ness” has the potential to resist normativity by overriding difference (a queering in itself) within a *specifically* sexual frame. Of particular interest to this project is the second part of Bibler’s book which explores “Southern Kitchen Romances,” or deep homo-social interracial partnerships between women: “these partnerships strike a delicate balance in which the women appear to enjoy a queerly personal equality that tests the limits of the meta-plantation’s power structures even as they hold back from immediately challenging those structures.”<sup>44</sup> Of southern sexuality scholars to date, Bibler perhaps most explicitly foregrounds homo-relations between women in the southern literary canon, as he interrogates works not previously examined for their complicated erotic connections between women. However, the same homo-social ambiguity that allows for a “southern kitchen romance” model—or female same-sex egalitarian intimacy—comes at the expense of continued racial subordination. Bibler’s study of homo-relations within the space of the southern plantation ends in the late 1960s, and doesn’t focus on explicitly lesbian relations, which is where my intervention comes in.

Although critical attention has increased, a great deal of primary source recovery work remains to be done. In order to account for the emergence of southern sexuality

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 124.

criticism, we might reflect on the temporal moment in which it arose in the academy. Considerations of temporalities are significant, celebratory, and transitional as “the period directly prior to any temporal moment has profound relational consequences and coherence for one’s own research inquiry, and most importantly...these preclusions are always in flux.”<sup>45</sup> Within five years of the passing of *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell* and the *Defense of Marriage Act*, the same decade that witnessed Brandon Teena’s murder and the founding of the confrontational organization *Queer Nation* also saw steady growth in regional academic endeavors engaging with sexuality.<sup>46</sup> I am implying here that a noticeable increase in southern studies scholarship exploring sexualities during the early 1990s happened *because* of politically and socially visible identity assertions motivated by advancements in the gay and lesbian liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s—advancements that circulated widely both in the nation and in the region through the production of southern lesbian literature. Indeed, the opening up of southern sexuality studies is owed in part to the literature produced in the preceding decades—literature that mirrored social and cultural shifts at the regional and national levels.<sup>47</sup>

*Southern Sapphisms*, then, maps the multiple ways a sense of temporality, region and nation constructs, emphasizes, troubles, and redefines southern lesbian identity and

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<sup>45</sup> Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) 361.

<sup>46</sup> Notably George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books 1994); Martin Duberman’s *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (Boston: Dutton Adult 1989), John D’Emilio and Estelle Freeman’s *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990).

<sup>47</sup> I am positing a correlative relationship here between politics and criticism and causal relationship between literature and politics.



vice versa. Essentialist theories of what it means to be southern, what it means to be a lesbian, and what it means to produce southern lesbian literature in the region and in the national spaces of the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation movements ultimately bracket and divorce understandings of how we inhabit identities and difference as always relational. There are two main currents of thought flowing throughout this project: first, these southern lesbian writers have made and have been part of an important period of activism for the larger feminist movement. Indeed, the southern lesbian writers I examine here were on the forefront of that movement—not on its margins, as they have been portrayed (if their contributions are portrayed at all). And second, for these writers, southernness is a critical context for their work, its rhetorical intentions, and its overall effect. In other words, these writers and their writings are meaningful, even central, to the national story of lesbian historiography, and their regional context is significant to better understanding their work and its relation to the national story.

This is, of course, not a comprehensive study of all southern lesbian literary productions during the period I examine. Together, each of the four chapters and conclusion I outline below explore southern sapphisms as literary productions—not only as products, but as performative, textual acts of sociality formation that made the later critical explorations of this community not only possible, but incumbent. These chapters present case studies that help us begin to recognize and understand the role region plays in lesbian literature and the role that lesbian identity plays in southern literature, calling attention to homo-community assertions through literary productions that some might claim weren't happening in the South. I am interested in how certain southern writers and certain lesbian texts narrate the relationalities of producers, products, and processes. At

stake here are the possibilities between lesbian women as producers of community and sociality, lesbian women's literary products, and the processes through which these contributions are made. In the process, this dissertation seeks to provide a sweeping and regional view of female same-sex love and sexuality in literary productions—exploring the ways in which women who love women conceived of and understood who they were, even as they worked to create a vision of southern lesbian community that we are just now beginning to explore fully.

The texts I examine (Blanche McCrary Boyd's *The Revolution of Little Girls* (1991), Minnie Bruce Pratt's *S/he* (1997), and Shay Youngblood's *Soul Kiss* (1995)) in chapter one, "Contemporary Lesbian Hypervisibility," illuminate not only an easily detectable lesbian narrative presence within southern literature, but one that is, as I term it, dynamically hypervisible. A shift from encoded sexuality present in mid-century southern texts requiring "a [critical] stance [that] involves peering into shadows, into the spaces between words, into what has been unspoken and barely imagined" to hypervisibility—where lesbian sexuality is not only visible, but depicted within a visual dynamic—demands new ways reading and methods of interpretation.<sup>48</sup> A shift to hypervisibility opens up a complexity of literary space for critical analysis where it has traditionally been obscured. If sexuality saturation already exists on the textual surface, we as readers may resist looking deeper into the narrative frame, to instead favor new reading methods that examine how we might look *across* literary representations produced within the years that bookend my study. Future reading methods for scholars of southern sexuality studies should incorporate close and surface readings, moving beyond

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<sup>48</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been" 460.

the idea of reading *into* and include reading at, with, and across literary productions.

Importantly, this chapter frames the salience of dual reading practices within the project as a whole as I explain how the hypervisibility of lesbian representation negates the need to uncover any latent sexual or regional content within a text. When a text presents lesbian hypervisibility, we should examine the emotions, feeling, and meanings available on the surface in textual actions, words, and thoughts; homosexuality is not the point as much as the richness in meanings and behaviors expressed between women and in sociality structures. Instead of separating sexuality as a category to be studied on its own, my work demonstrates how sexuality works as the entry-point to understanding the wider web of southern sapphisms.

I model the close and surface reading methods explored in chapter one in each of the following chapters—two, three, and four—to illuminate my thematic focus on hypervisibility within multi-genre literary productions. While my dissertation spans 1974-1997, these texts within five chapters are arranged thematically and with reading methods in mind, rather than in chronological order. By organizing chapters in this manner, I offer a more comprehensive portrait of southern sapphisms and their intersecting reading modalities than if they were arranged by publication date. In tandem, readings in chapters two, three, and four not only fill gaps in the field of southern sexuality studies in terms of genre and temporality—as they examine post- mid-century journals, poetry, fiction, and plays—but also combine to effectively foreground the region’s central place in a traceable American queer literature canon.

Chapter two, “SUBSCRIBE TO *FEMINARY!* Producing Community and Archive” showcases my vital archival recovery work by examining the formations of

lesbian identity and community in the North Carolina journal *Feminary*—a journal that gained national importance long before transferring to San Francisco in 1985. *Feminary* has been lauded by one scholar as “the source and backbone of contemporary Southern lesbian feminist theory,” due in part to the forum it provided for southern lesbians to voice their inimitable outlooks on race, regionality, and social justice.<sup>49</sup> It exemplifies the radical political act of putting lesbian identity in print both nationally and in the South. As an especially salient literary and cultural artifact for understanding how lesbian sexuality in this region was represented and consumed, *Feminary* signals a transition from representing sexual otherness textually to producing actual sites of sexual belonging. Such an endeavor is revolutionary in that it evidenced an energetic grassroots commitment to critiquing and examining potent systems of oppression in the South: “the racism of a former slave system; the capitalism that generated it and the misogyny and homophobia that also held it in place.”<sup>50</sup> At the local level, *Feminary* forged and grounded a community of Durham feminists, lesbians, and women writing and printing as a collective. At a national level, I show how the women of this journal were actually inspired by the increasingly turbulent battles over civil rights in the South. This revelation upends prevailing notions that the Stonewall riots in New York were the watershed that changed lesbian and gay politics and culture in the nation.

My work on *Feminary*, however, recasts this narrative by showing how lesbian feminist politics also gained their inspiration and momentum not from Stonewall (or at least not only) but from the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and massive

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<sup>49</sup> Tamara M. Powell, “Look What Happened Here: North Carolina’s *Feminary* Collective,” *North Carolina Literary Review* 9.1 (2000): 92.

<sup>50</sup> Mab Segrest, *Memoirs of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South End Press 1994) 41.

resistance against civil rights and gay and lesbian rights in the South. Moreover, these southern origins of lesbian feminist writing and activism also offer early examples of the class and racial intersectionality later theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. This chapter proves that Second Wave feminism and modern lesbian politics have extensive southern roots; to ignore the distinctly regional dynamics of those roots is to misunderstand the complexity of those movements across the nation and beyond.

The third chapter, “Put A Taste of the South In Your Mouth: Carnal Appetites and Intersexuality,” examines fiction and poems from Dorothy Allison, Doris Davenport, and Minnie Bruce Pratt—works that place sex at the center of intersectionalities in an effort to intricately illuminate how “eating, writing, and loving can and must be brought together.”<sup>51</sup> Looking at and with lesbian hypervisibility represented through the vehicle of food, we see writers exploring the tangible connections, social dimensions, and affective possibilities that thinking sex through southern food reveals. Thinking sex through food in these works of poetry and fiction expands the possibilities for negotiating lesbian sexuality beyond the individual body and into the social realm. If we “stand detached” from sexuality and “bracket its familiarity” within the multiple identity forming sites and fracturing spaces that a model of thinking food reveals, we begin to develop a politics of sexuality rooted in connection and disconnection, where bodies live in food and sex knowledge and through structures of intense sociality.<sup>52</sup> Hypervisible representations of lesbian sexuality in these poems exude the centrality of pleasure, and

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<sup>51</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: Food/Sex/Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 5.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books reissue edition, 1990) 3.

the material play of identity exemplified through the consumption of southern food. Hypervisible representations of lesbian sexuality in these poems also echo the legacies of southern food, thus offering regional approaches to studying other identity axes including race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

In the fourth chapter, “Coming Out and Tutor Text Performances in Jane Chambers’ Lesbi-Dramas,” I continue my explorations of lesbian hypervisibility in southern literary productions to assert that *A Late Snow* (1974), *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (1980), and *My Blue Heaven* (1981) function as explicit tutor texts, because instances of lesbian hypervisibility in these works, are, in fact, performed. As such, these plays concretize visually and aurally what the text of the script conveys, and in so doing, require the audience to process and understand codes and meanings at a moment’s notice—while, perhaps, calling into question the theatregoer’s own institutionally determined set of beliefs or values.<sup>53</sup>

Through the performance of these plays a sort of visual imaginary is communicated to the audience: discourses within the scripts advocate for lesbian social justice at the national level, intersecting with social politics and public identification. Surface representations of positive lesbian relationships combine to produce a critical, and above all, visible message to audiences and readers alike: “tutoring them” in unabashed and discernible demands for equality, tolerance, and solidarity—both deftly, and strategically, within the South and the nation. There are infinite possibilities for performance and re-performance in these works, which in turn, nightly set the stage for empowering political claims.

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<sup>53</sup> Kate Davy, “Constructing the Spectator: Reception, Context, and Address in Lesbian Performance.” *Performing Arts Journal* 10.2 (1986): 44.

Although we might be hard pressed to situate Chambers' plays alongside more overt representations of southernness, they do contain subtle connections to the region when contextualized within the histories of southern literature and drama, especially the works of Lillian Hellman and Carson McCullers (for example, Chambers' *A Late Snow* strands lesbian characters in a snowbound cabin; this strategic use of snow-as-fate is reminiscent of McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), where Frankie is obsessed with snow and the new life it represents for her).

I assert that Chambers' plays are examples of non-southern southern writings, or more precisely, these works lean toward nuance and intricacy when representing southernness. She employs conspicuously non-southern settings, exemplified through a deft use of intentional southern erasure. Chambers avoids both urban settings and overtly southern ones in an effort to foreground her tutor text messages through lesbian hypervisibility—moving her characters into southern locations would, in effect, shift the focus from lesbian issues of political importance to overwhelmingly regional ones. We gain a greater understanding of her non-southern southern writing, that is, her strategic inclusion of southern (literature) allusions, when considering it within the framework of more explicitly, self-consciously southern writings that I explore in chapters one, two, and three.

Undoubtedly, this study will be joined by other critical interventions similarly motivated to suture together, over time, a more exhaustive account of southern lesbian literary productions written in post-Civil Rights era United States. We can look forward to a more densely textured picture of literary analysis that will help us hypervisibly recognize and understand the role region plays in lesbian literature and the role that

lesbian identity plays in southern literature, and how southern lesbian writers conceived of and understood who they were through their works. It is with an awareness of this probability that I explore a few final speculations and possibilities in the concluding chapter.



## CHAPTER ONE READING LESBIAN HYPERVISIBILITY

In *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*, Michael Bibler states, the “invisibility of recognizable sexual identities does not mean the absence of alternative sexualities—only that what we see in front of us may be something different from what we are used to seeing.”<sup>1</sup> If critical research in southern sexuality studies has thus far primarily focused on mid-century representations of same-sex intimacies, homo-social relations, and sexual otherness—stressing the degree to which readers must peer into suggestions recondite from the textual frame—the question must be asked: what *are* we used to seeing (now)?<sup>2</sup> Overt descriptions of sex acts, erotic dialogue, playful stereotype subversion, and close attention to narratives of queer lives in many post-Stonewall era texts attest that visible same-sex desire and acts have “quite simply become inescapable in southern fiction as it

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<sup>1</sup> *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2009) 22.

<sup>2</sup> While this chapter is centrally concerned with focusing on the “what” of this question, it is fascinating to pause and consider how the “we” is elegantly interconnected. Who are “we” here? On the level of discipline, “we” refers to sexuality studies scholars, southern studies scholars, and scholars of southern sexuality studies here. But, with reading methods in mind, “we” also refers to entire generations of scholars in the humanities “formed in the era of interdisciplinarity,” and trained in the practice of symptomatic readings, or a specific type of interpretation that “took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by the interpreter” (Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best “Surface Reading: An Introduction” 1). This will become especially relevant in my later discussions of lesbian hypervisibility in this chapter, as hypervisibility on the surface of texts redirects the hermeneutic of suspicion away from the “in-ness” of the text outward, to the interpreter. The most fascinating parts of the text change, shifting from “what” “we” are used to focusing on in the past, as we are relieved of searching for hidden sexuality due to the surface representations of lesbian hypervisibility where sexuality is incredibly perceptible.

has in other modes of southern literary production and southern culture.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, that discernibility to which Bibler refers, or in his words, “what we are used to seeing” is a direct, decisive result of hypervisibility themes present in the works analyzed in this chapter—and the women who wrote them. In post-mid-century texts, encoded gay and lesbian presences and homo-allusions became a literary thing of the past, as suggested by the literary productions of a widespread catalogue of southern women writers (many of whom identify as lesbian): Dorothy Allison, June Arnold, Rita Mae Brown, Doris Davenport, Fannie Flagg, Sally Gearhart, Bertha Harris, Lynn E. Harris, Valerie Martin, Mab Segrest, and Alice Walker. Concurrent shifts in social revolutions—namely, contemporary feminisms, the gay and lesbian homophile movement, and the emergence of queer and gender politics—have “allowed for...or even demanded” subsequent literary evolutions.<sup>4</sup>

The fiction of any of the aforementioned writers could easily demonstrate the differences between mid-century works preoccupied with issues of sexual otherness and more contemporary literary texts engaging with same-sex desire; indeed all of these texts, to greater or lesser degree exhibit what I term lesbian hypervisibility. By “hypervisibility,” I mean a super saturation or blatant celebration/recognition of lesbian topics and themes in these selected works—*understood relationally* in comparison to mid-century southern literary works where the perceived absence/presence of sexual otherness is a matter of willful denial or careful detection. Where a “close” reading of mid-century texts might suggest the presence of sexual taboo, hypervisibility represents a

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) 199.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

violation of taboo itself, thus obviating the necessity of “close” reading for sexual non-normativity. A shift to hypervisibility opens up the complexity of textual space. In these texts, those expanded literary spaces reveal specific paradigms of viewing relations for critical analysis where they might otherwise be obscured. If non-normative sexual/social saturation already exists on the literary surface, we as readers may resist looking deeper into the narrative frame to instead favor new reading methods that examine how we might look *across* literary representations. These methods for scholars of southern sexuality studies analyzing post-mid-century texts should incorporate both close and surface readings, moving beyond the idea of reading *into* and include reading at, with, and across literary productions.

The texts I examine in this chapter— Minnie Bruce Pratt’s *S/he* (1997), Blanche McCrary Boyd’s *The Revolution of Little Girls* (1991), and Shay Youngblood’s *Soul Kiss* (1995)—illuminate not only an easily detectable lesbian narrative presence within southern contexts, but one that is dynamically hypervisible. A shift from encoded sexuality present in mid-century southern texts requiring “a [critical] stance [that] involves peering into shadows, into the spaces between words, into what has been unspoken and barely imagined” to hypervisibility—where lesbian sexuality is not only visible but depicted within a visual dynamic—demands new ways of reading and methods of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Surface readings, argue Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in a special issue of *Representations*, manifest analysis on the breadth of texts and their generative range of possibilities. This mode of reading seeks to understand the complexity of narratives without slipping into symptomatic elisions that render germane

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism.” *Feminist Studies* 7.1 (1981): 460.

parts of the text unimportant. Close reading methods have been characterized by Foucauldian epistemological analysis, but also through the pervasiveness of “a latent meaning behind a manifest one.”<sup>6</sup> Marcus utilizes the manifest meaning, or what she terms a critical surface reading, by indicating what the text says about itself and how that telling might be literally received at face value.

She lists many types of readings that might fall under the surface umbrella including: surface as materiality or the material structures that create perception (history of the book), surface as the verbal structure of literary language (New Formalist), surface reading as affective and ethical (Sedgwick’s reparative reading or Timothy Bewes’s reading with the grain), surface as a practice of critical description (face value), surface as location of patterns that exist across texts (critic as taxonomist or anatomist), and finally, surface as literal meaning or just reading “without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation.”<sup>7</sup> Examining homoerotic, homosocial, and/or homosexual relationships exclusively in terms of power difference commits the intellectual fallacy of defining relationships expressly within that conceptual framework. Symptomatic readings should be practiced in relation to other techniques including analyzing the surface of texts.

In this chapter, I combine specific surface reading methods—critical description, literal meaning, and affective charge—in an effort to read across and with themes, patterns, and structures existing between the texts in order to model a “relatively modest”

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<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 60.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. “Introduction to Surface Reading.” *Representations*. 108.1 (2009): 11-12.

goal: show what the text says about itself, and what affective stances it takes.<sup>8</sup> These surface reading techniques are especially meaningful for establishing my notion of hypervisibility; reading texts for their critical description or what Marcus calls “face value,” is an obvious choice when confronted with discernable, obvious representations and descriptions of female same-sex desire, identity, and acts. Reading hypervisible lesbian topics and themes at face value expands the textual conversation to include questions that encompass how that hypervisibility is represented, translated, and signaled to readers.

Lesbians and lesbian sex exist on the surface in these works—no shocker there. But key to my notion of hypervisibility are the themes and structuring elements that make it *so* surface and apparent—for example, seeing and looking—in effect, preoccupations that signal and complicate webs of rich visual elements.<sup>9</sup> Surface reading of these texts for their affective charge enables examinations that read with the grain to consider affective registers present in the texts—for example, resonances including shame, guilt, fear, longing, confusion, desire, and emotional malnourishment. These strategies are rich in relation, and provocative in their pairing as they illuminate a less closeted body of southern literary productions focused on open considerations of female same-sex intimacies. Each of the texts I examine here forecast several main points that illustrate the value of my surface and close reading approach: 1) there is a movement in these texts—or more accurately, in and by these texts—from self-discovery to community formation, 2) overt emphasis on lesbian sexuality is but one of many identity factors represented,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>9</sup> These motifs of looking and seeing are especially significant when considering the need to recognize lesbian community and be recognized as a lesbian.

and finally, 3) there is a move from depicting the “non-normative” to representing a new kind of social normativity network: communities.

Foucauldian interpretation methods work especially well for analyzing mid-century texts; noting instances and moments of queer behavior, sociality, and desire is an endeavor marked by practices of unveiling and revealing. As Bibler has stated, “We must train our eyes to recognize the subtle presence of “deviant,” different, and non-normative forms of gender and sexuality embedded within works that, on the surface, might not seem to include much that is overtly queer, let alone 'gay' or 'lesbian.’”<sup>10</sup> And while considerations of time, place, and law made it considerably difficult for mid-century authors to depict lesbianism on the textual surface in a hypervisible manner, paradigms have progressively altered over time.

A shift has occurred in both the manner in which sexuality is textually represented and understood by readers—ultimately contributing to a complex web of visibility relations mediated by acts of looking and seeing. Indeed, overtly lesbian, explicitly non-normative forms of gender and sexuality visible “on the surface” in these works preclude the necessity to “train our eyes” at all. A commitment to hypervisibility through thematics of seeing and looking structures the literature I examine, and writers in this chapter textually express those commitments in elegant, complex ways. We as readers must retrain our eyes to *accept* literal meanings offered at face value—significantly, how they are gestured through acts of looking and seeing—and the affective registers that lesbian hypervisibility indicates. This critical stance generates scholarship that reads face value and affective intersectionalities across literary productions—shifting from whether

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<sup>10</sup> *Cotton's Queer Relations*, Acknowledgements.

lesbian sexuality exists or not, or where it is embedded in a particular work—to question how texts work in relation to each other and what they in tandem suggest about sexuality, sociality, and region.

Opposed to midcentury southern literature’s representations of “sexual otherness” this body of work actively produces sites of sexual belonging by validating lesbian and southern lesbian cultural identification. These texts represent the process of drawing relationships between sexual desire and region, gender, race, class, space, and time—allowing lesbians to build new kinds of openly visible social and literary collectives even as they enabled heterosexual readers to envision new types of southern communities. Compellingly, while these works often focus on different aspects of lesbian movement, process, and validation, they each exhibit these points in relation to each other—not only as individual texts. What they have in common, especially on the surface, is their overt depictions of female same-sex desire and their southern settings, affective resonances, and identity claims.

Academic investments and scholars of southern sexuality studies would do well to begin looking at this abundant, largely untapped body of contemporary texts. These representations of southern sapphisms are especially rich sites for modeling the hybrid reading methods I believe these texts invite. Adolescence, gender, coming out experiences, dress, families, infidelity, affect, and humorous political stereotyping are modalities suggested through critical description, face value, and affective surface reading techniques. While these textual preoccupations should not be understood as constitutive of what it meant to be a lesbian in the south during the 1970s and 1980s, they do evidence an interrelatedness with nationally circulating post-Stonewall LGBT

visibility politics—asserting southern lesbian writers (producers) and their literary works (products) in an ongoing cultural revolution. Of special significance was the creation of hypervisible images in southern lesbian literature—emphatic figures that changed, challenged, and explored what it meant to be southern and lesbian.

What then is recuperated, gained, and ascertained by incorporating surface and close readings as methods for interpreting lesbian hypervisibility? At the very least, lines of inquiry alter: shifting from asking what is lesbian or southern about these texts, we might fruitfully begin to instead question how southern literature has changed over time with regard to non-normative sexual explicitness. Fascinating emergent niches rise and decline at given moments in the social, literary, and political historical timeframe in which these texts are produced. These works of southern literature forecast virtually all the major shifts in the discourses and theoretical underpinnings of sexuality studies: for example, each moves away from the circulations of the “open secret” in literary assessments of the 1940s and 1950s; each illustrates the activist and sociality building literary productions of the 1960s and 1970s; and Pratt’s *S/he*, in particular, engages with the infusion of Foucauldian theory and the emergence of gender politics in the 1980s and 1990s.

Lesbian hypervisibility requires strong critical analysis of the text—not weak. When sexuality is not coded within a text, the interpretation does not explicitly focus on invisibility characterized by an absence/presence—but rather on the expression and meanings of it. Expansiveness is key, for through lesbian hypervisibility, authors are able to engage with other celebratory and fracturing discourses beyond and including sexuality. As literary critics, we have trained our eyes to search for those “non-normative



forms of gender and sexuality embedded in texts”; hypervisibility calls the need for searching for sexuality into question, but it does not call into question the important implications of sexuality for relationships, politics, power dynamics, fear, clothing, gender, class, and region.<sup>11</sup> When a text presents lesbian hypervisibility, we should look with, at, and across the emotions, feelings, and meanings evidenced by actions, words, and thoughts; locating lesbian sexuality is not as much the point as is exploring the richness in sheer meanings and behaviors expressed between women within sociality structures.

This allows us to distance ourselves from “searching” reading methods and to ask questions surrounding broader significance and scale: What do gender, race, class, space, and time mean in a lesbian relationship? How does that lesbian relationship built on such multifarious factors change or shape a character? What is the relationship of region to sexuality, and how does this representation allow readers to envision new communities that celebrate lesbian cultural identification? How does a character’s lesbianism affect her life as a whole? Conversely, while lesbian sexuality is more visible in these works, it does not mean that a close reading analytical lens is unnecessary—simply that hypervisibility enables critics to approach the text as unquestionably lesbian or queer, and to begin to fit the work within a burgeoning southern literary subgenre, focusing on dramatic shifts in form and theme to discover what each text offers with regard to the lesbian experience.

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

## Seeing and Looking: Preoccupations in Contemporary Southern Lesbian Literature

The following texts share multiple similarities and differences—much like their authors. All three writers are women. Each hails from a southern state—Boyd from South Carolina, Pratt from Alabama, and Youngblood from Georgia—although only Youngblood currently resides in the South. Disparities exist along generational and racial lines: Boyd and Pratt are Caucasian and born only a year apart while Youngblood is over a decade younger and African American, and while Boyd and Youngblood’s sexualities remain undeclared, Pratt identifies as a lesbian and shares her life with transgender activist Leslie Feinberg. Their works that I examine continue this fluidity: all three exhibit lesbian topics and themes following a loose *bildungsroman* narrative structure, but only the protagonists in *The Revolution of Little Girls* and *Soul Kiss* come of age within the novel’s temporal frame.

Pratt’s largely biographical *S/he* is less a novel and can more accurately be described as a memoir through which Pratt grapples with sex and gender. She “comes of age” not from childhood to adulthood experiences, but rather, through transitioning more fully into her personal identity as a lesbian. *S/he* is an effort to “give theory flesh and breath,” in that Pratt seeks to “reconcile the contradictions of sex and gender, in my experience and my politics, in my body.”<sup>12</sup> Utilizing identity politics as a conceptual, lyrically poetic framework, the memoir sketches Pratt’s ten-year heterosexual marriage, family encounters, book tours, lesbian relationships, and memory treasures through a compilation of vignettes. Nearly seventy vignettes are loosely organized into seven chapters. Topics range in content from feminism, butch/femme dynamics, and strap-on

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<sup>12</sup> Minne Bruce Pratt, *S/HE* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1995) 21.

sex to thoughtful discussions of gender and Pratt's personal reaction to the Brandon Teena murder. Her writing taps into fear and excitement, pleasure and uncertainty as she navigates—at times determinedly, at other moments urgently—away from one life and toward another.<sup>13</sup>

While there is no doubt that Minnie Bruce Pratt embarks on a journey to find her identity in *S/he*, it is valuable to note that her search is plagued with fears and shame, stemming from an unconscious fixation at the time of writing on normative ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. The first section of the book, titled “Gender Quiz,” stands separate from the subsequent vignettes in that it accomplishes dual tasks: first, to acquaint the reader with the gender issues Pratt grapples with in the pages to follow, and second, to offer a uniquely introductory space for Pratt to ponder “what kind of woman (is) a lesbian woman... (and is she) a ‘real’ woman?”<sup>14</sup> This is a critical structuring moment for Pratt’s experiences within *S/he*, because these concerns prove to be intrinsically related to her struggles with apprehension, shame, humiliation as she perceives them—consistent affective themes throughout her vignettes. These themes—although not limited to her sexuality, are often problematized and revealed through Pratt’s sexual desires and encounters. At times, Pratt discloses this sense of ignominy tacitly:

Satiated, I coil around her and fall asleep. In my dream I feel something swell between my legs, heavy and hot [...] first I am lying on my husband, his penis engorged against my stomach. Then it is her penis that burrows

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<sup>13</sup> In terms of genre, I see Pratt’s *S/he* memoir following a historical trend of southern women’s writing from memoir and personal experiences.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

and bumps against me. Then I shift and know: Perhaps it is my own, writhing and dreadful between my legs.<sup>15</sup>

The words *writhing* and *dreadful* connote feelings of guilt and shame for her “un-womanly” desire—one that is foreign and insatiable, therefore attributed to the penis and masculinity. More commonly, however, Pratt reveals her emotions in an explicit, hypervisible fashion: she is “ashamed for anyone to see (her) desire” and on another occasion feels that “a wave of shame stings my skin” as her lover takes precautions to hide her exposed body.<sup>16</sup> In both of these instances, Pratt finds herself at odds with her desires and actions because they do not constitute the want she imagines a feminine woman must feel. Significantly, once these affective responses of shame are triggered, Pratt activates facial responses to defend herself: her eyes are downcast, her face veiled, her cheeks frequently blushing.

Perhaps more significant than identifying that Pratt is a victim of shame is exploring the reasons why she is so often faced with these feelings. Notably, Pratt makes known early on that she represents what is considered to be a “femme” in her declaration: “I am definitely lesbian, but not in a way recognizable to a heterosexual world that assumes lesbians to be ‘mannish.’”<sup>17</sup> Pratt’s insistence on labeling herself as “femme” is not solely an attempt to secure a different identity within a new environment, as such gendering of her sexuality antithetically functions as the foundation for subsequent feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Pratt writes, “she and I looked down and noted that all

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 141, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

the *femmes* had shed *our* shoes and were walking around” signaling to the reader that she is, without question, identifying as part of that category through self-viewing.<sup>18</sup> The pattern of identifying as “femme,” and consequently, reinforcing a butch/femme sexual and gender binary persists from the memoir’s beginning to end.

Adrienne Rich writes of the heterosexual mind, which functions only in terms of binaries that “keep numberless women psychologically trapped, trying to fit mind, spirit, and sexuality into a prescribed script,” ultimately draining “the energy “of ‘closeted’ lesbians.”<sup>19</sup> Conversely, Pratt comes “out of the closet” in her collection of vignettes, but only into a very limited room that continues to operate under binary “laws” of gendered heteronormativity. Because she has elected to embody “femme,” and accepts the mandated assignations of feminine and masculine behavior, she experiences a negative affective response, shame, in her desire to control, to dominate, or to possess. Consequently, she unconsciously still functions within the constraints of a society which believes the aforementioned traits to be aggressively masculine ones—unfit for femininity and competing images of southern womanhood.

The vignette “Boots” serves as evidence of the woman-man/passive-active duality that confines Pratt. She speaks to the elusive “you” in a confessional tone: “I was afraid to touch you, to become animal, sexual creature, the woman who wanted to be touched in return.”<sup>20</sup> What is problematic is not that Pratt has opted to be romantically involved with

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Snitow, Anne, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, (York: Monthly Review Press, 1983) 64.

<sup>20</sup> Pratt, *S/HE* 71.

a “masculine” figure or that she might be judged as attempting to reenact “heterosexual” sex as is the case in the passion-filled vignette, “Cock.” What is problematic is the fact that she feels self-mortification—“flick of sex in my clit, the shame at craving...”—for having desires that are deemed to belong to the masculine figure; her shame is rooted in the idea that a “real” woman should not possess such cravings—to consume or be consumed.<sup>21</sup> Even though confusion runs rampant in the memoir, there are instances in which she attempts to skew a femme/butch dichotomy and challenge the idea of feminine womanhood. For instance, when she cuts her hair during the summer, her lover fixes her with a disapproving look as she “stares and says, ‘You’ve cut it so short. Now people will think you’re the butch.’”<sup>22</sup> Upon attempting to blur the lines of “butch” and “femme,” Pratt is met once again with censure that stems from a gender-based cycle of shame and abidance— affective charges signaled through nuanced acts of looking and seeing.

Pratt takes part in perpetuating binding, normative thoughts through her interactions with others and through the politics of dress. “Drag Bar” provides an example of the importance of clothing in Pratt’s accounts; she sees a “butch” because the woman wears a “shirt and tie, men’s suit, men’s socks and shoes.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, when describing herself and her partner, Pratt does so most often by stating that she wears a skirt, and her partner wears a tie or a suit. Pratt later proves to value the dichotomy that she and her partner so visibly represent in their sexuality: “I am the only woman at the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 67.

party wearing a skirt. Of the other women...some are femmes, some butches...some are kiki or androgynous. But no one pushes masculine and feminine to the edge of woman as we do.”<sup>24</sup> To the edge here is key; Pratt embodies a hypervisible, ultra, or “high” femme identity. And, oh “how they stared” at her gender conformativity/performativity at the party.<sup>25</sup>

“Steam Heat” shows Pratt further enmeshed in the politics of dress; attire signals gender, sexuality, and most importantly for her, the confidence derived from absolute conviction in these matters. At the opening act for the Red Dyke Theater at the Great Southeast Lesbian Conference, she sits “a still-married woman, next to my first woman lover, watching how to be a lesbian.”<sup>26</sup> Taking visual cues and social etiquette as directives on how to be an authentic lesbian and how not to be, Pratt physically and mentally occupies a space of dubiety. As Pratt's lover critically lists her series of missteps—“I introduce her too possessively, I exclude her in conversations, I decide my workshops without her, I'm affectionate at the wrong times”—Pratt increasingly wonders if “married heterosexual life has distorted my behavior as a woman.”<sup>27</sup> How to act, speak, and behave is no longer clear as her new lesbian identity encompasses complex sites of negotiation—this uncertainty is complicated substantially by her lover's controlling nature. Physical intimacy is laced with awkwardness and shame. Pratt cannot escape questioning how to be a lesbian, a femme, and what tensions exist between the two as she

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39.

begins to understand the implications in both spoken and unspoken ways of expressing gender and embodying her sexuality.

Later, at a “Lesbian Mother” workshop, women sit “drinking ice tea while sweat slides down our faces like beads of water on the glasses in our hands.”<sup>28</sup> The environment particularly functions as a marker of southern womanhood here, even as the lines surrounding gender and sexuality become blurred. Pratt looks at how the other women are dressed:

mostly jeans and shorts and T-shirts, some boyishly short haircuts, a few discreet hoop earrings. Nothing very bright or feminine. Maybe this would be the safe way to dress as a woman on my own, without a man, no calling attention to myself as sexual prey. Maybe men would leave me alone and other lesbians would say hello. Curious to have to dress less “like a woman” to find the women like you. Is it dressing in someone else's idea? Is it a belief that a woman who loves women really just wants to be a man, and so surely she will dress like one?<sup>29</sup>

Cultural representations of what a lesbian is supposed to dress like combine with her personal reflections on dress as an indicator of belonging. Pratt is not only looking at these women, but simultaneously seeing the figure she herself presents—even as readers are seeing both representations. Ways of looking then become tremendously meaningful here as they enable readers to consider other identity-laden questions that relate to lesbian hypervisibility. The public and the private operate on dual levels as the personal and community become entwined, rendering lesbian both as a subject position performed in this instance through dress—Pratt’s as well as the women surrounding her—and a group identity that is either conferred through proper or improper dress. A greeting, safety,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 40.



access, awareness, acceptance, and self-surety—even possibilities for sex—hang in the tension-filled balance:

My date asked, “What do you think, is she a butch?” And didn’t listen as I said, “Yes, of course she is. She looked at me.” Instead, my friend whispered to me, “I aspire to that style,” and she gave me a little lecture on butch as the achievement of perfect monochromatic clothes. I did not say that if she had looked longer, and inclined her head toward the back room, I would have gone. What was I doing all those years? Waiting for you to look at me, just once.<sup>30</sup>

And yet, while these acts of looking facilitate an abundance of ways to see herself—and accompany socially elicited affective responses—they also expand and restrict Pratt's notions of how she reads sex and gender in other women she looks at to see “how to be a lesbian.”<sup>31</sup> The women she observes at the workshop are not femme, unlike a woman who goes to a party later that night dressed “in a diaphanous silk blouse over a slinky dress,” with hair that “swirls in snaky whips down to her waist.”<sup>32</sup> Pratt's ruminations speak to commonly experienced “femme issues” present in a butch/femme dichotomy when viewed from the outside; the former are sexually spurned by heterosexual men because of their masculine appearance, whereas the latter appear as heterosexual prey through their femininity—touching on the idea that femme-identified lesbians so often go un-“seen” by butch lesbians (who read them as straight) and overly seen by men (who do not recognize or acknowledge them as lesbian). She struggles with these notions until a co-existent reality intrudes: upon arriving home, her husband confronts her “outraged over the love notes he's found stuck in my feminist book”; the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 40.

vignette ends with Pratt's firm declaration that “one definition of a lesbian is a woman with a job.”<sup>33</sup>

Pratt's *S/he* looks at the arbitrary and oftentimes reinforced boundaries imposed around maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity. The vignettes are small accounts of how and when and where these issues crop up in her daily life—in seeing and looking, Pratt engages with the fleshiness around what we now call queer theory, exploring how to do her own sexuality and gender within a specifically southern context. Consider this excerpt from a talk Pratt and Feinburg gave at a 1994 Ithaca College and Cornell University LGBT student coalition meeting:

Well you know at home, in the deep South, and in the culture that I came up in, everyone flirted with everyone else within my social circle, within my specific social circle. It's how you communicated; it's a very delicate art. It wasn't sexual, it was about attending to someone, appreciating them, appreciating their specific qualities, alluding to those qualities in a certain sorta flirtatious way with a look, or a gesture, or a reference, you know. And you did that across gender boundaries, you know. You flirted with women, not because you were a lesbian, but because that's how you communicated socially. And it was a shock for me to come into lesbian culture and discover that flirtation was completely laden with sexual meaning. It was a real shock. I don't actually flirt with people I'm sexually interested in...I'm careful about that.<sup>34</sup>

Flirting, of course, is gestured through the face, by the eyes, in acts of looking and seeing. Pratt is shocked to learn that a practice she viscerally associated with southern sociality conveyed a quite a different message within the lesbian community. Here, again, we see her negotiating how to be a lesbian—even as she squares that knowledge in progress away with how to be a southern woman. Flirting operates on dualistic levels specifically

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>34</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt audiotapes. Human Sexuality Collection, Cornell University Library.

vis-à-vis what is communicated nonverbally but hypervisibly. Pratt's vignettes of lesbian hypervisibility in *S/he* urge the reader to accept their literal meaning at face value—opening up ways to trace how that visibility is expressed and conveyed through acts of looking and seeing. Reading with the hypervisibility grain, we as readers see multitudinous examples of complexly nuanced affective registers through which Pratt comes to understand her sexual re-awakening.

Blanche McCrary Boyd's *The Revolution of Little Girls* follows a more traditional coming of age formula; the protagonist's growth unfolds from adolescence to womanhood as opposed to the various degrees of sex and gender acceptance we see in *S/he*. Set in South Carolina during the 1970s, the novel traces hilarious ups and downs in Ellen Burns's adventurous and eccentric life. At nine years old, Ellen spends all of her time playing Tarzan with her best friend, Hutch—although she understands that “the real world was suspicious of little girls who did not want to play Jane.”<sup>35</sup> Despite this rather astute observation, Ellen remains largely idealistic until two events occur that alter her life; at twelve she begins menstruating, a change that proves to be an impassable physiological and psychological barrier between her and Hutch, and later, the bonds of their friendship are permanently severed after Ellen reveals a secret that she and Hutch had once shared.

Several key moments signal Ellen's initiation into adulthood, and through them she develops increased experience, knowledge, and understanding. While these scenes are useful for building an analysis of the novel as *bildungsroman*, I am more interested in reflecting on textual moments that signal lesbian hypervisibility, and more broadly, the

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<sup>35</sup> Blanche McCrary Boyd, *The Revolution of Little Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 1.

themes and preoccupations that fracture sexuality in the text, specifically her relationship with her mother. Boyd carefully interweaves humor in these emotionally poignant moments—subverting trite stereotypes into vehicles through which heavy burdens are absorbed by Ellen and revealed to the reader:

Three months after I returned to California, my lover left me and returned to her husband, a man who wore his shirts half buttoned, exposing a chestful of hair and gold chains. She grew her nails long again, and painted them red. “I just couldn't handle it,” she said.

“It?” My lover had been a radical who said the word *lesbian* as easily as my mother said *segregation*. “What about being revolutionaries? What about custody of the cats?”<sup>36</sup>

On the surface, two hackneyed lesbian generalizations are at work here: the first, a politics of nails, and the second, the presence of cats. Nails, like felines, are areas of contestation in the lesbian community, and while at first glance these matters may seem arbitrary and superfluous in relation to the language confluence of lesbian/segregation, they are, in fact, not.

Insider/outsider status is conveyed through these seemingly innocuous images. Ellen's lover “grew her nails long again”; this phrase implies that long nails are a determining factor in recognizing sexual identity, or at the very least, certainly a consideration in lesbian sex acts. For Ellen's lover, nail length becomes a physical demarcation of her turn away from lesbianism and simultaneous return to her husband. This physical signal, of course, is a stereotype: that a proper, good, and considerate lesbian has short nails while straight women keep their nails long—reinforcing the conceit that fingers and hands are primary sex organs for lesbians *only*—or that lesbian sex relies *solely* on fingers and hands for pleasure, or even the idea that being a lesbian

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 36.

*prohibits* long fingernails altogether. And yet, when we look with this stereotype rather than searching for deeper meaning within it, we begin to see how Boyd brilliantly suggests that such sentiments may have special significance for both lesbian readers and non-lesbian readers who are conscious of lesbian stereotypes. Whereas mid-century queer southern literature relied on insider knowledge to illuminate sexual otherness, Boyd illustrates that however damaging they may be, commonly circulating stereotypes reach wider audiences, therefore extending concentrated images of lesbian visibility to those who might not otherwise be exposed.

The politics of community are especially meaningful here as the parallel between Ellen's lover's use of the word lesbian and Ellen's mother's use of segregation is highlighted. Ellen's mother and Ellen's lover clearly have little in common politically except their frequent use of two highly politically charged words. Ellen's lover is/was radical, while Ellen's mother is not. Generational and regional differences are at play in this excerpt; the two young women are "revolutionaries" in California in contrast to Ellen's mother's own relatively regressive racial consciousness in South Carolina. Two ideologically separate spheres are embodied in these characters' descriptions, although Boyd is yoking them together here: West coast progressiveness and southern backwardness. And yet, Boyd's stereotypes remind us that location, education, or even a revolutionary social stance does not preclude or assure any stability in terms of radical sexuality; Ellen's lover still "couldn't handle it" despite her non-rural, socially-conscious upbringing.

Ellen's increasing hunger for love and acceptance continues, as illustrated through her awkward attempts at exploring sexuality in high school and college, her impetuous

marriage to Nicky Sommers, and her drug and alcohol abuse. Later, Ellen's neediness with her girlfriend, Meg, causes Meg to withdraw. Meg rebukes Ellen, saying:

I think you're creating it. There's a kind of black hole in you I can't possibly fill. When you reach for me, it feels as if you are actually pushing me away. You're just so hungry.<sup>37</sup>

This hunger becomes personified in one of the apparitions Ellen begins to see after a trip to Peru. Three imaginary female children appear to Ellen in a series of dream sequences. One of these children is chubby and demands to be fed. She tells Ellen that she is a representation of her appetites. When Ellen awakens from this dream with a mound of peanuts before her, she remarks to Meg that she is "too hungry."<sup>38</sup> This reference to hunger is more an admission of emotional need than an account of physical malnourishment.

Hunger proliferates in the novel, signaling an emotional, affective record of ugly feelings. Outbursts from Ellen and her siblings in their upbringing oftentimes occur in the midst of a family dinner, denoting that not only Ellen is famished from lack of care and protection, but also that her brother and sister are as well. Food is also associated with the joyful times Ellen's life concerning her mother. Before the death of her father, Ellen and her mother bake cakes together; her mother tells her "you can do anything you want to do, if you just believe in yourself enough."<sup>39</sup> After her father's passing, Ellen's views on food change drastically, as does her mother's attitude toward it. Sympathy gifts of food fill the house, yet Ellen's mother rejects all food for ten days, claiming not to be able to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 81.

swallow.<sup>40</sup> This signifies the point when Ellen first begins to feel emotionally starved by her mother—her remaining parental figure with whom she desperately craves intimacy.

Following the loss of security symbolized by her father, Ellen becomes more vulnerable and disconnected from her mother. The plot moves forward, then doubles back as if Ellen is nervously relating the events of her life in a conversation. Hidden in the folds of the narrative are the fragmented details of abuse by her uncle. At her sister's funeral, Ellen is overwhelmed with anger as she remembers the abuse. Sexual abuse is alluded to, and Ellen's mother reveals that her daughter's navel was burned. The navel is the center of one's body, the middle of one's stomach where physical nourishment is centered—and where our bodies were once connected to our mother's center. Her uncertain memories of the abuse lead her to directly question her mother, who defends her complacent role saying, "Honey, he's my brother."<sup>41</sup> During the confrontation, her mother looks "frail and old," leading Ellen to uncertainly agree with her, saying, "it is no one's fault."<sup>42</sup> Her mother's weakness seemingly produces a parent/daughter role reversal that allows her mother to escape responsibility even as Ellen allows her to do so—further severing the connection between them. Tellingly, following this turning point in the novel, the family gathers for morning pancakes over the dining table—an insufficient, unsatisfying meal that signals Ellen's continued emotional malnourishment.

A considerable event that illustrates Ellen's emotional need for maternal companionship in relation to nourishment takes place the night of The Miss Plaxton High

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 74.

School pageant. After Ruby, the family maid, is robbed of food supplies, Ellen enters her rustic, unlocked shack to make a shocking, tellingly *visual* discovery:

Pictures of food were tacked on the walls: a chocolate frosted layer cake sliced open to reveal a yellow interior, a roast beef cooked rare, a pile of sugar cookies decorated with green and red sugar. “What a good idea,” I said, not understanding yet.<sup>43</sup>

Impoverished Ruby has no food and yet she yearns for it, pasting pictures of coveted items on her tattered walls to signify this desire. Ellen feels she does not have her mother’s approval and love, and upon seeing these photos, we as readers understand at face value that she aches for it in a similar way. Throughout her life, we view Ellen coming to grips with these feelings deep within her—an unvoiced song echoing the symbolism in Ruby’s photographs.

Ellen’s difficulties surrounding sexual relationships and intimacy later in the text are directly linked to a lack of maternal guidance as she grows into adulthood. Two specific scenes occur when Ellen is a young teen that exemplify this: when Ellen uncouthly draws her mother’s attention to cattle breeding in front of a stranger saying, “Mom, look!” and when Ellen is at the gynecologist’s office, making light of the affectively—and physically—discomforting experience. Both episodes involve Ellen hypervisibly confronting sexual explicitness not only in front of her mother, but also in the company of a non-family member. In both instances, her mother states angrily, “You did that on purpose...to embarrass me.”<sup>44</sup> Ellen’s mother instills shame in her and denies Ellen any sense of relief that questioning or embodying sexuality is ordinary—not

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 90-2.



abnormal. Furthermore, Ellen's mother makes a point to critique Ellen's gender performance, continuing a sense of manipulative control and disapproval. In chapter six, her mother jokes openly about Ellen's gender deviancy at a family dinner, calling her a "tomboy," while conveniently declaring that she did not have to worry about Ellen with boys.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of Ellen's actions or deeds, her mother seems to find a way to condemn her. When Ellen attends a church where African Americans are integrated, her mother responds in a visually evocative manner, saying, "How can I show my face in public?" (147). When she attends her brother's wedding with her lesbian lover, her mother asks Ellen's lover, Rain, "What is a normal girl like you doing with Ellen?" Later, Ellen's mother adds that Ellen's love for women makes her mother want to vomit.<sup>46</sup>

Ellen fills the vacancy left by her mother's lack of admiration with alcohol, drug experimentation, tranquilizers, radical ideas, and spiritual advice from various Shaman gurus. When she finds success in writing a bestselling book, the subject of her work mirrors her inner struggle. The cookbook she publishes brings her wealth and flexibility in her literary career, but signifies that she is still internalizing the childhood hunger her mother previously instilled within her.

Looking with the text, while Ellen appears to have come to terms with her lesbianism—indeed, in this novel sexuality is only one of several intersecting identity fracturing discourses—her maternal starvation continues to manifest itself in vivid visions of little girls who exhibit the details of her inner emotional disorder. In the final

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 164.

interaction with her mother in the novel, a retelling of Ellen's first poetry writing endeavor (on a paper red heart) triggers feelings of scarcity:

When we're watching TV  
And you're in your seat  
You're always nice enough  
To get me something to eat.<sup>47</sup>

Beneath the poem and the picture of Little Debbie from an ancient box of snack cakes, "I love you, Mom, Ellen Lorraine" is scrawled.<sup>48</sup> The blind, bulimic child Ellen repeatedly envisions claims to have written it. This is a direct manifestation of the starvation she has suppressed—poignantly expressed through acts of looking and seeing, or in this case, blindness and veiled emotions—or more precisely, the starvation that permeates all of the struggles she battles with in terms of her sexuality and dependence on drugs. Ellen finally notices how blind she was to her mother's own vulnerability, as well as to her own internal famine caused by the lack of maternal love.

At the close of the novel, Ellen's self-acknowledgment of aching hunger for her mother's love sets her free in a way that drugs, alcohol, sexual encounters, and spiritual experiences never could. Just as Ruby adorned her walls with pictures of food in hope of one day possessing them, Ellen fostered hope that her mother would emotionally support her. The novel's concluding sentences beautifully bring her rollercoaster ride of bitter emotions, substance abuse, and insecurities to a screeching halt as her mother asks if she has eaten any breakfast. Finally, perceiving her own reflection in her mother's eyes—the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 195.

ultimate act of looking and seeing—Ellen simply replies, “I did. Anyway, I’m not hungry.”<sup>49</sup>

This wrenching, multivalent hunger suffuses another novel centered on the life of a southern lesbian. Filled with rich imagery, lyrical language, and stirring eroticism, Shay Youngblood's *Soul Kiss* is contemporary lesbian southern literature par excellence; major themes surrounding gender and sexuality emerge, including same-sex desire, lesbian hypervisibility, and on darker notes, rape and incest. Queer operates as both an other-ed subject position and an opposition to normative sexual behaviors in this novel. Its protagonist, a young, bi-racial girl named Mariah Santos bears the burden of a loving, yet absent drug-dependent mother. Mariah is “hungry for a mother’s love.”<sup>50</sup> Like Ellen, she hungers for a close physical and emotional relationship with her mother—and while Ellen’s mother is present whereas Mariah’s is not, both girls affectively exhibit emotional starvation. Sent to live with her two lesbian great-aunts in rural Georgia, Mariah resolutely continues to search for love or “the taste of soul kisses”—familial, romantic, or friendship—even as she encounters and overcomes multiple traumas to her girlhood innocence.<sup>51</sup>

Mariah makes friends with a “girly-girl” at school; together they play in the afternoons, passing time and learning each other’s bodies as they explore girlhood desire:

And we kiss for hours, years go by and our lips and our eyes remain closed, together. We discover other secret feelings in my bedroom with the door closed. I like touching her closed eyes with my lips, pressing my

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>50</sup> Shay Youngblood, *Soul Kiss* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2000) 32.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 206.

tongue in her belly button, brushing against her soft, fat thighs with my cheeks. I hide crayons and nervous fingers between her legs to see how far they will go.<sup>52</sup>

Yearning for closeness, physical intimacy, and care, Mariah discovers pleasure and censure at a young age; the girly-girl's mother soon discovers their childhood experimentation and condemns both girls in the name of religion. The two girls never touch each other again—their eyes were forcibly opened.

Because Mariah has a strong connection with words via her early relationship with her mother:

“The word was written in blue ink in my mother’s fancy script... pretty... sweet... blue... Sometimes she gave me words in Spanish... bonita... dulce... azul... The word I kept in my mouth, repeated like a prayer when I missed her.”<sup>53</sup>

This connection with words is so strong that she finds comfort in those words. The performative act of writing down words to remind her of being loved and cared for at one time functions to alleviate moments of paralyzing worry and fear. In one particularly affectively charged scene, words become Mariah’s escape during her rape by the “old man who looks like somebody’s grandfather.”<sup>54</sup> Disassociating from her body, she repeats,

*“A is for apple... B is for boy... C is for car... D is for dog... E is for elevator... F is for far, far away. I am underwater. I am drowning, drowning, drowning. I scream, but no sound comes out of my mouth.”*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 5.

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

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 113.

Reading with the grain, readers cannot detach from this moment by way of language, as words are the very vehicles through which her pain is translated. The affective resonances are long lasting; Mariah wants to forget, but as she “look(s) into the mirror above the sink” she knows she is not the same person.<sup>56</sup>

Many years later, Mariah encounters the girly-girl's sister in-law, a woman named Tree. Staring at Tree's “long smooth fingers draped over the car door” Mariah becomes flustered, blushes, and wonders how to draw the conversation out between them.<sup>57</sup> Tree's “lips are so close,” her “hair is cut so close,” and “up close she still looks like a boy.”<sup>58</sup> As Mariah looks at Tree, so do *Soul Kiss*'s readers; on the surface, Tree embodies a female masculinity that is sensually provoking and irresistible for Mariah. The repetition of “so close, up close” combined with the act of looking strongly echoes the importance of readings this text at face value. Mariah's observations—hair short cut, a blue baseball cap, shy smiles, and a funky walk—combine to render the act of looking particularly salient in this exchange. Looking at Tree, Mariah “wants to hold her in my sight for just a few moments longer.”<sup>59</sup> Desire progresses from looking to seeing, from noticing to perceiving, and from visibility to hypervisibility.

Acts of looking in *Soul Kiss* are sometimes queer in another sense of the word. After leaving home to live with her artist father in California, Mariah begins fantasizing

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 182.

about and fearing her relationship with him. Standing in his bedroom, surrounded by his shoes, underwear, and shirts, she breathes in each item deeply:

When I am naked I look at my body with his eyes. For hours it seems I stare at my body in the mirrors and then, finally, something happens. I begin to see his hands caressing my shoulders from behind. I can't take my eyes away from his hands. They feel the weight of my breasts, graze my nipples, trace the curve of my waist down to my thighs, then open the lips between my legs. I am paralyzed with fear, longing, and desire. And then just as suddenly as they appeared his hands are gone. I close my eyes, then open them very slowly, but they do not reappear. I am still alone.<sup>60</sup>

Mariah blurs the familial relationship lines between father and daughter with her gaze in the mirror, imagining and merging masculine dominance with paternal love. Again, looking functions as a means of introspective sexual deviance as his hands on her body evoke violence, victimization, and a taboo representational image—overwhelmingly translated through affective language. Her self-hatred and emotional need not to be alone reflected in her father's mirrors is perhaps triggered by psychological trauma inflicted by the rape she experiences en route to California. Looking at her body through her father's eyes—and conversely, through her rapist's eyes—Mariah is “overwhelmed with feelings” she cannot comprehend as the two coalesce.<sup>61</sup> Hypervisibility in this moment heightens the reader's awareness of the pervasive potential in both looking and seeing—particularly within a queer context—Mariah's fantasy is profoundly, and uncomfortably vulnerable.

Looking across Boyd's *The Revolution of Little Girls* and *Soul Kiss*, we see a formulaic parallel: Ellen looking at her reflection through her mother's eyes and Mariah's looking at her reflection through her father's eyes. These acts of looking are oscillating

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 134.

on the surface of both texts; we as readers see the commonalities in both as each feature young girls sexually coming of age, seeking parental approval and love. Surface reading techniques incorporating face value and reading with the grain for affective registers speak to the presence of hypervisibility, and related themes that cut across each text.

Characterized by strategies of indirection, tentativeness, and encoded allusions, mid-century southern literary productions depict sexual non-normativity during a starkly different time in American history, and conversely, within the southern literary canon. Richards has pointed out that negotiations of same-sex desire in mid-century texts occurred without much of a frame of reference, or more precisely, that “a relatively clean slate—or blank screen—is often more frightening than the one already filled.”<sup>62</sup> As Pratt’s, Boyd’s, and Youngblood’s fictions attest, that is not entirely accurate. In fact, it is clear that literary representations arising from more recent, contemporary temporal frames actually highlight the difficulties and potentialities in contributing to a full(y hypervisible lesbian) slate or screen. Unlike the mid-century texts analyzed by Richards and Bibler, there is, generally speaking, no need to “unearth” lesbian subtexts or fill a blank screen in these works. Rather, the challenge, as I have argued here, is to develop hybrid methods of reading works of southern literature that overtly depict lesbian desire and sex. By incorporating surface reading techniques of literal meaning, critical description (face value), and affective register, a full textual screen or what Richards calls the entire “frame of reference” opens, exhibiting preoccupations with looking and seeing that exist with, across, and in relation to other texts.

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<sup>62</sup> Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds* 206.

What surfaces in these works is a pronounced effort to affirm what is already so apparent: while the actual materiality of textual production enabled burgeoning (self-) discovery in an individual sense, in turn, and on a broader scale, it fostered a growing southern lesbian community that revealed sexual identity to their readers as a hypervisible literary and political topic. In each of these three texts, preoccupations with sexual experiences mediated through acts of looking and seeing are but one factor of many that structure self-identity, as the increased visibility associated with coming out is put into dialogue with the politics of gender, emotional hunger, family ties, and broader sets of regional markers. Representations of lesbian sociality, female homo-eroticism, and sex between women are anything but “hesitant, encoded, or deferred” here in works illustrating the shift from non-normative to new normative.<sup>63</sup> What we are now “used to seeing,” is a new normative not of sexual behavior or identity, but of hypervisible depiction and community. These literary productions exhibit the process of drawing relations across sexual desire and region, across gender, race, class, space, and time—which ultimately allowed lesbians to find one another and build new kinds of sociality networks. This transition from representing sexual otherness textually to producing sites of sexual belonging was largely due to the products, producers, and process invested in hypervisibility work that validated lesbian cultural identification through literary productions.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 207.



## CHAPTER TWO SUBSCRIBE TO *FEMINARY!* PRODUCING COMMUNITY AND ARCHIVE

Southern writers were very much a part of the radical feminist movement of the 1970s, and many sought to make a lesbian voice heard through advancements in small press publishing. Because the South is largely written out of U.S. lesbian historiography more generally, it might seem surprising that North Carolina natives generated unprecedented contributions to post-Stonewall era lesbian literary productions: Bertha Harris, author of *Catching Saradove* (1969) and co-author of *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* (1977) was a Fayetteville local; Mab Segrest, author of *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (1985) and her autobiography *Memoirs of a Race Traitor* (1994) resided in Durham; founders and editors of the still-published lesbian periodical *Sinister Wisdom*, Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson, both inhabited the Triangle area; and the poet Minnie Bruce Pratt lived in Fayetteville. The creation of a distinct lesbian perspective in literature and language during this period not only fostered woman-defined spaces committed to examining and challenging patriarchal oppression in all its many forms—homophobia, racism, classism, and sexism—it simultaneously brought to fruition a markedly southern assemblage of authors producing lesbian sociality through and alongside their writings. According to Lillian Faderman, “These women believed that such a culture could only be formed if women stepped away from the hopelessly corrupt patriarchy and established their own self-sufficient ‘women-identified communities.’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 216.

*Feminary* is a hidden from herstory literary journal produced through a robust women's writing collective. It has been lauded as "the source and backbone of contemporary Southern lesbian feminist theory," due in part to the forum it provided for southern lesbians to voice their inimitable outlooks on race, regionality, and social justice.<sup>2</sup> In critiquing heteronormativity, racial prejudice, and class discrimination, *Feminary* exemplifies the disobedient act of putting lesbian identity to print in the South; speaking out in public constituted a radical political statement. As an especially salient literary and cultural artifact for understanding how lesbian sexuality in this region was represented and consumed, *Feminary* signals a transition from representing sexual otherness textually to producing actual sites of sexual belonging. This is largely due to the product (the journal itself), producers (Feminarians), and process (small press publishing) of validating lesbian cultural identification as something more than a hypervisible literary and political topic: "community is not utopia; utopia is rather a vision of community."<sup>3</sup> *Feminary* affirmed and produced southern lesbian community: spaces where women met to discuss issues like collectivity, racism, classism, violence, and capitalism, while taking great care in structuring non-hierarchical working relationships that valued personal growth, motivation, reflection, and acceptance.

The first installment of what would later materialize into a fully realized *Feminary* was published on August 11, 1969 by a group of southern women who

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<sup>2</sup> Tamara M. Powell, "Look What Happened Here: North Carolina's *Feminary* Collective," *North Carolina Literary Review* 9.1 (2000): 92.

<sup>3</sup> *Feminary* (9.1) 46. Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

“gathered together over spaghetti suppers” to plan out each issue.<sup>4</sup> That originative one-page publication undoubtedly carried a faint residual scent of ditto fluid, and it sold for a scant two pennies. What evolved by the late 1970s into a quarterly feminist journal for the South “emphasizing lesbian visions” initially began as a local newsletter distributed amongst women’s groups in the Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> The desire for political change, female empowerment, and feminist community visibility drove the production of *Feminary*, and the journal stands as an early marker of lesbian-feminist activism and literary organizing in the South.<sup>6</sup>

Early drafts of works that would later develop into an impressive body of southern lesbian literature made their first appearances in *Feminary*, namely volumes of poetry including Dorothy Allison’s *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983), Minnie Bruce Pratt’s *The Sound of One Fork* (1981), and Mab Segrest’s *Living in a House I Do Not Own* (1982); Pratt’s and Segrest’s essay collections, *Rebellion* (1991) and *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel*; and Allison’s first work of fiction titled *Trash* (1989). Beyond these advancements, *Feminary* functioned as more than a space for literary circulation and consumption—it flourished as a galvanizing force through which southern lesbians might unite as a community to articulate a raised consciousness, or as Pratt recalls, “we felt like

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<sup>4</sup> John T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001) 381. The journal was first published so soon after the Stonewall Riots, which began on June 28, 1969. The significance of this temporal convergence will become clearer in later discussions.

<sup>5</sup> *Feminary* (11.3 March 1981), Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>6</sup> Cherry Wynn, “Hearing Me Into Speech: Lesbian Feminist Publishing in North Carolina,” *North Carolina Literary Review* 9.1 (2000): 85.

we had something very important and different to say because we were in the South” (Pratt interview).

Such an endeavor was revolutionary in that it evidenced a small, yet energetic grassroots commitment to launching a specifically regional publication within a broader national lesbian-feminist print culture network.<sup>7</sup> When (and if) included in print culture studies and lesbian studies scholarship, *Feminary’s* important role in the region and nation has largely been neglected, in favor of historicizing the journal’s emergence and decline. And yet the journal’s importance was manifold: on a national level, it challenged operating narratives of stereotypical backwardness and political passivity that characterized the region; at a regional level, *Feminary’s* content dared to subvert long-persisting institutionalized notions of femininity, manners, and proper southern roles for women (that liberating disavowal disseminated between southern states through the publication’s circulation); at the local level, it forged and grounded a community of Durham feminists, lesbians, and women writing and printing as a collective.<sup>8</sup> Put in

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<sup>7</sup> Nationally circulating lesbian-feminist literary presses, including Naiad, Persephone, Diana, Aunt Lute, Spinsters Ink, Daughters Inc., Firebrand Books, Cleis, and Kitchen Table, published many iconic works of lesbian literature emergent from the Women’s Liberation Movement, including Rita Mae Brown’s remarkably lesbian-explicit novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (New York: Bantam, 1973), as well as the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and the lesbian separatist newspaper *The Furies* (1971-2). See Julie R. Enszer’s dissertation “*The Whole Naked Truth of Our Lives: Lesbian Print Culture in the United States from 1969-1989* (College Park: University of Maryland, 2012). While Enszer’s dissertation contains a chapter on North Carolina lesbian feminist print culture, it focuses entirely on the small press *Sinister Wisdom*, and elides discussions of *Feminary*, although both were produced in the same period.

<sup>8</sup> Countless feminist writing collectives emerged across the country during this period. The most well-known collectives were: *Conditions*, a lesbian-feminist collective begun in 1976; the lesbian separatist group *The Furies*, which notably included the writer Rita Mae

dialogue with discourses of U.S. nationalism, *Feminary* writes against southern regional discourses that serve as foils to the rest of the nation by positing a “backward South” to an “enlightened nation.”<sup>9</sup> These oppositional relationships inform various cultural and political concepts of American exceptionalisms; *Feminary* engaged with issues at the forefront of the Women’s Liberation and gay and lesbian movements, thus anticipating and disrupting these and other prevailing discourses. At the regional level, *Feminary* challenged the implicit southern imaginary—creating a space where women were empowered to critique their lived experiences and examine their individual politics of location in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

This chapter will investigate *Feminary*’s literary production at each of these levels, focusing particularly on how the journal blends feminist writing and activism with distinctive and regionally specific dynamics—and most importantly, why those dynamics have special significance at the national level. *Feminary* proves that 1970s era feminisms and modern lesbian politics have extensive southern roots; to ignore the distinctly regional dynamics of those roots is to misunderstand the complexity of those movements across the nation. The women of *Feminary*—a group of anti-racist southern lesbians—were inspired to take action, organize, and form the collective due to increasingly turbulent battles over civil rights in the South, and a strong desire to enter the Women’s Liberation movement through the radical act of publishing their regionally informed

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Brown; the Boston Women’s Health Collective (1969-current), publisher of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; and the black feminist group, The Combahee River Collective, established in 1974. For a subversive reclaiming of queer rural stylistics in response to the privileging of queer metronormativity, see Scott Herring’s book *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009) 2-3.

perspectives on patriarchy, class privilege, and racial and sex-based discriminations.

Lesbian feminist politics in the region, as exemplified in the production and distribution of *Feminary*, gained its momentum not only from the 1969 Riots at Stonewall, but from regionally specific watershed moments that gained national attention, including reflections on Emmett Till's murder and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, as well as regionally specific issues that gained local and community attention, including strikes at North Carolina textile mills predominantly staffed by women, and the observance of International Women's Year in 1977.

Stirred by the U.S. Women in Print Movement, the *Feminary* editorial collective did more than produce a pamphlet, newsletter, and eventual journal that gained nationwide distribution—these women strove to negotiate the explicit intersectionalities they daily faced as blue-collar and white-collar, black, white, and Jewish lesbian feminists in the South.<sup>10</sup> *Feminary* is evidence of a strong commitment to expressing

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<sup>10</sup> The grassroots/DIY Women In Print Movement was a necessary cultural and literary response to national mainstream publishing corporations that did not encourage or print independent lesbian feminist tracts, including, and perhaps especially, those from lesbian feminists of color. The passage of U.S. federal and state laws incorporating the language of the 1873 Comstock Act prohibited circulation of lewd or lascivious material through the postal service; this included censoring any materials that implicitly or explicitly contained or condoned homosexuality. While the U.S. Supreme Court granted free press rights around homosexuality with the *One, Inc v Olsen* trial in 1958, many of the bigoted ideologies including “crimes against nature” statutes that justify discrimination and prejudice still persist in state laws today—just as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. For more on the Women in Print Movement, and how small grassroots initiatives like *Feminary* challenged prevailing national ideologies by pursuing justice and equality through women's writing, see the manifestos, speeches, and essays documenting the Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture collection at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University Libraries. See also Trysh Travis' 2008 article, “The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications” in *Book History* (Vol. 11 p. 275-300), and Kate Adams's 1998 article, “Lesbian Energy and Feminist Ideology in Alternative Publishing” in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (34. 3-4 p. 113-141).

southern lesbian voices and history through literary output (at the local and community levels) from a deeply political and activist-oriented collective—in the South. These writings circulated beyond the region to challenge dominating economic and social structures in the United States in part because they were uniquely informed and equipped to do so by their distinctive regional dynamics. *Feminary*, and other journals like it, are representative examples of the birth of lesbian-feminist publishing of the 1970s through the Women in Print Movement—and *Feminary* is an important facet of southern print culture lineage that paved the way for the emergence of 1980s and 1990s era southern lesbian literature.

As a print culture artifact, *Feminary* is a material object that enhances our shifting understandings of queer archival documents and the germane legacy of LGBT histories within archives. But, *Feminary* also functions as a valuable source for imagining the role of archive and counterarchive formation—I believe that in producing the journal, the women of *Feminary* actually worked to narrate and explore the southern lesbian experience, and in so doing, they created an archive of stories and reflections that significantly teach us about the subject, the individual, and the role of archive-building through community formation.

The importance of archival research is well recognized within southern sexuality studies scholarship, too: John Howard’s canonical anthology *Carryin’ On in the Gay and Lesbian South* contains contributions that utilize institutional, community, personal archives as a repository for queer lives and cultural artifacts, from team records of lesbian softball communities in Memphis at midcentury to the personal letters of Lillian Smith and William Alexander Percy. In “Sex, Smashing, and Storyville in Turn-of-the-Century

New Orleans: Reexamining the Continuum of Lesbian Sexuality,” Katy Coyle and Nadine Van Dyke contextualize Storyville prostitutes within a rich history of print culture, illuminating how bluebooks and advertisements “shaped perceptions of lesbian sexuality” even as they revealed the anxieties and fetishization surrounding race as a central factor in the geo-political formation of Storyville.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Un-Natural State*, Brock Thompson delivers an archivally rich assessment of queer Arkansas, joining such state-specific social histories as Howard’s influential study on Mississippi, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (1999). At once both a decidedly individualistic journey and a queer-community-driven trek through Arkansas’s past, Thompson’s book makes use of “autohistory,” or the inclusion of the personal in conversation with historical perspectives.<sup>12</sup> He establishes the salience of regional identity in queer lives through his sharp blending of state history and personal narrative grounded within archival discoveries that encompass photos, scrapbooks, yearbooks, letters, diaries, and marginalia.

Archive formation was a key thematic, strategic dynamic, organizing principal for the journal for *Feminary*, from its origins and throughout its multiplatform publication run. As such, *Feminary* is a *representative* example of community formations through archive, valuable for understanding and reading other “traditional archives,” as evidenced above, or even “counterarchives” of lesbian southern experience produced through

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<sup>11</sup> Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke, “Sex, Smashing, and Storyville in Turn-of-the-Century New Orleans.” *Carryin’ On In the Lesbian and Gay South*, John Howard, ed., (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 56.

<sup>12</sup> Brock Thompson, *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010) 13.



community formation. As a material object, *Feminary* contained information and wisdom that formed an archive of previously silenced knowledge surrounding ideas and identities of southernness and sexuality—an archive that circulated and produced sociality in the process.

### **Historicizing *Feminary*'s Literary Significance: Sociality as Archive**

*Feminary*'s literary evolution is a story of regrowth and adjustments in focus—reflecting two shifts that occurred nationally in the women's movement of the late 1960s and the developing gay and lesbian movement of the early 1970s. At the time of *Feminary*'s emergence in 1969, the women's movement in both Durham and Chapel Hill was rooted in groups and organizations that focused on consciousness-raising: for example, *Womancraft* (an outlet for women-made arts) and *Lollipop Power*, a small writing collective publishing non-sexist children's books, were located in the Hill-Carrboro area, and the lesbian-feminist focused *Night Heron Press* emerged from the Triangle, too.<sup>13</sup> Reflecting on her experiences with *Lollipop Power*, Sara Evans writes,

For Group 22, however, partly because most of us had, or were about to have, children, and partly because we had a high concentration of sociologists, the ways that children “learn” to be female or male became the focus. In many other consciousness-raising groups, women talked about and thought through their own socializations....[Group 22] was downright evangelical. Eager to spread the movement, we...organized a letter...and participated in regional gatherings and workshops. We wanted answers (imagining naively that they existed), and we plugged through...literature and angry mimeographed pamphlets that circulated

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<sup>13</sup> This publishing collective was originally founded as part of a local women's organization called Group 22. The numerical title reflected a propensity for women's groups in the area demarcated by non-hierarchical numbers. Group 22 “transformed itself into a children's book writing and publishing collective...it persisted until the mid-1980s, long after most originators moved away” (Evans, *Tidal Wave* 10).

from group to group around the country. When we read them, we joined a national conversation....<sup>14</sup>

Beyond literary outlets, other groups including the Chapel Hill Rape Crisis Center, the Durham Women's Health Co-op, and the Women's Center of Durham arose to address and promote local women's health related needs.<sup>15</sup> In 1976, Ladyslipper, an independent mail order women's music label was established in Durham and is still thriving today. In their practicality, these organizations served as materializations of national women's liberation movement ideals—feminist ideologies concurrently coming into being, shaped, and refined—even as they marked clear advancements of those principles within an unmistakable regional context. Moreover, these materialized ideologies—exemplified through female sociality groups—were uniquely embodied, subjective expressions. And a number of women who participated in and benefited from these early community groups identified as lesbians.<sup>16</sup>

*Feminary's* earliest incarnation appeared in a greatly reduced form—as only a page or two of typed content titled the *Research Triangle Women's Liberation Newsletter*—a humble pamphlet advertising women's groups in the area which began circulating in 1969. With the third issue, the title changed to the *Female Liberation Newsletter of Chapel-Hill*, reflecting a greater diversity of interests. While the national women's movement would later draw criticism for its problematic focus on issues

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<sup>14</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003) 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Feminary* (10.1) Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, *Tidal Wave* 13.

relating to white, upper middle class women, the local Durham/Chapel-Hill feminist community took as its focus the concerns of working-class women in the surrounding areas. The *Female Liberation Newsletter* reported items of interest including food worker strikes at UNC in 1969, and the dangers of lung disease affecting workers at textile mills nearby.<sup>17</sup> Troubled by news that female food employee strikers at UNC were experiencing difficulty financing daycare for their children, the newsletter's community established a temporary daycare center.<sup>18</sup> Class related issues were closely linked to racial concerns in those early newsletters—perhaps unsurprising, given the confluence of Martin Luther King's assassination and the resulting race riots that broke out across the South that same year. *Female Liberation Newsletter* #11 from the same year chronicled attempts to form a new local organization called "Sisters United," a group of women aligned with laborers from Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company who filed a sexual discrimination lawsuit against the company, arguing that,

the fight against white supremacy is the first principle of unity among women because it is the only principle which can unite all women—black, brown, yellow, red, and white. It is important to build a united front of all women for the battle against male supremacy, since this is the only way we can win.<sup>19</sup>

This unique point of view evidences the lived experiences of women "having been raised with the oppression not 'out there' but rather close up and personal," which "gave *Feminary's* southern white feminists a distinct perspective from which to identify,

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<sup>17</sup> *Feminary* (10.27) Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer L. Gilbert, "*Feminary*" of Durham-Chapel Hill: *Building Community Through A Feminist Press*, A Master's Thesis (Duke University, April 2003) 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

analyze, and critique racism and classism.”<sup>20</sup> Now a hallmark concept of second wave feminism, the term “intersectionality theory” introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw and further discussed by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) as a “matrix of domination” or various intersections of social inequality, echoes that point of view held by the journal’s writers. Among the first Feminarians there was a great commitment to “working on issues of race, because they are vital to an understanding of our lives as they have been, as they are, and could be.”<sup>21</sup> The matrix describes how cultural patterns of oppression are not only related but also influence one another in social systems, ultimately resulting in oppressive measures to females that ultimately change a woman’s experience living in society—lessons that the *Female Liberation Newsletter*’s contributors learned early on.

One example of this comes from an article written by Kathy Tomry and Nancy titled “Things Are Rough All Over But—A Look at Class,” published in *Feminary* 8.2 (1977). The collective members had been discussing issues of race, collectivity, money, separatism, and violence for the past year, and those conversations were very much informed by the members’ personal politics of location. The majority of Feminarians at the time of this issue were “white, college educated, young (22-33), middle class” women

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<sup>20</sup> Powell “Look What Happened Here,” 92.

<sup>21</sup> *Feminary* 9.2 (1979) 3. In *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001) 381, James T. Sears notes that Feminarians “refused to do a ‘one shot about race and/or racial issues but to make more solid our own commitment to these issues by seeing that we become more and more responsible toward black women and black people.” His source is drawn from *Feminary* Minutes, 22 October 1979, Segrest Papers, Box 3, Perkins Library Archives, at Duke University. This evidences that more primary source materials exist within archives that I have been unable to access to date. For future iterations of my work, I will most assuredly consult these materials.

who identified as lesbian feminists.<sup>22</sup> Anticipating the later critical work on intersectionality from Crenshaw, the Feminarians acknowledge that their experiences with these issues, and their discussions of them, were very much influenced by their identities as understood through the matrix of race, gender, class, and sexuality. However, rather than denying their privilege in some areas of that matrix, the Feminarians acknowledged it, and used their experiences to begin a conversation about class. Using their observations as a starting point for discussion was a way in which intersectionality enabled them to critique and understand difference in the social field around them. Notably, the Feminarians outline other areas in which they are shaped by personal experience, one of them being “what part of the country we’re from (urban/rural, North/South).”<sup>23</sup>

The struggle for class equality complexly influenced and was shaped by the highly visible racial disparity women of color experienced in the South. Dismantling racism and increasing racial awareness was of central importance to *Feminary’s* early foremothers, who firsthand witnessed the relationship between patriarchy and white dominance from the region that, at least in the national imaginary, seemed to lead a vanguard against desegregation and the progressive Civil Rights Movement. In *Feminary* 8.2, the Feminarians hypothesize that if women in the South care about other women and if they, as a collective call themselves southerners, then they have a responsibility to be aware of the racial politics of the region and use racial consciousness to shape the

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<sup>22</sup> *Feminary* 8.2 (1977) 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

decisions they make, for, “our movement will not come any closer to meeting the needs of all women and being relevant to their lives until we do.”<sup>24</sup>

After dying of internal neglect within the collective, and troublesome issues with communication between members, the *Female Liberation Newsletter* never again reemerged. Interestingly, it bears noting that in the last year of its distribution (1973), “several mentions of lesbian literature and issues pertaining to lesbianism appeared for the first time...they were sporadic—often simply a line mentioning a new lesbian publication.”<sup>25</sup> This is especially meaningful given the direction the newsletter would next take as the politics of sexual preference increasingly began to drive feminist activism in the area. The periodical would transmute yet again in February of 1973 when the *Feminist Newsletter* arose and ran as a bi-weekly journal. No longer a small announcement sheet for local feminist groups, the *Feminist Newsletter* signaled a revitalization in content and topical emphasis: women wrote about rape, lesbianism, and network building while contributing their own personal essays, poetry, and book/film reviews. Expansion brought with it a shift in energy: members of the collective increasingly viewed “coming out” as an important issue within the Durham-Chapel Hill community of feminist activists. According to Elizabeth Knowlton, an early and instrumental member of the *Feminist Newsletter*, “there was just more and more stuff about lesbianism, and women coming out, and women becoming lesbians.”<sup>26</sup> When partners Leslie Kahn and Nancy Blood moved into a house with Elizabeth and Linda

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert, *Feminary of Durham-Chapel Hill*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 25.

Brogan, a lesbian-feminist commune flowered—resulting in a vibrant surge in the collective writing which governed the production of the *Feminist Newsletter*.

The *Feminist Newsletter* often saw its greatest strength and most problematic issue located within the same topic: collectivity. And while the struggle to negotiate a feminist, egalitarian, and above all, non-hierarchical writing collective oftentimes lent itself to difficulties in production, the reward was felt tenfold as women found sources of strength, nurturance, and guidance in and through community assertions carefully operating as alternatives to traditional power structures. For the Feminarians, collective writing functioned to enhance an environment of critical reflection, where “the power of collectivity lies in the dynamic structure of commitment to oneself, to the other members of the group, and to the constantly evolving ideology” that

is essential because 1) we free ourselves from elite privilege and rigid roles, 2) we select issues that affect us and achieve power over the outcome, 3) we avoid one-to-one struggles for permission and approval, 4) we support each other in confrontations with agents of the present society who wish to put us down.<sup>27</sup>

Publishing under collective action was more than a nod to nationally circulating goals and agendas of the Feminist Movement—in particular, advancements in cultural feminisms that focused on revaluing and reaffirming the female through artistic expressions.<sup>28</sup> Collective writing fostered a group solidarity centered on responsible calls to action, vigilant willingness to question authority and authenticity, and germane support

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<sup>27</sup> *Feminary* (5.20) Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>28</sup> Evans, *Tidal Wave* 146.

networks between women where literary production, politics, and personal narrative coalesced, instrumentally asserting the value of lived experiences in public discourse.

Such assertions were exhilarating. According to an interview conducted with mid-era Feminarian Nancy Blood, “it is hard for me to isolate the newsletter from becoming a political person, and a lesbian, and a feminist. It is the most important thing that happened in my life...It was formative—I feel I became a person at that point in time.”<sup>29</sup> As an identity-forming outlet, the journal was poised to provide a uniquely female experience of publishing and community building while functioning to forge a thrilling new women’s culture. *Feminary* would later evolve to express a strong southern lesbian identity in an even more hypervisible way, and these early developmental years for the journal largely determined the celebrated and recognized lesbian literary presence that was yet to come—one that challenged both real and constructed ideologies of non-normative sexuality in the south as hidden and repressed.

In 1975, with volume 5, number 20, *Feminary*, “a visionary guidebook containing the wisdom and information collected by our foremothers” materialized and ushered in a golden epoch of distinctive southern lesbian literary output.<sup>30</sup> The journal encouraged

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<sup>29</sup> Gilbert, *Feminary of Durham-Chapel Hill* 81.

<sup>30</sup> The title *Feminary* was appropriated from Monique Wittig’s *Les Guerilleres* (1969): “The women are seen to have in their hands small books which they say are feminaries. These are either multiple copies of the same original or else there are several kinds. In one of them someone has written an inscription which they whisper in each other’s ears and which provokes them to full-throated laughter. When it is leafed through the feminary presents numerous blank pages in which they write from time to time. Essentially, it consists of pages with words printed in a varying number of capital letters. There may be only one or the pages may be full of them. Usually they are isolated at the center of the page, well-spaced black on a white background or else white on a black background. The women say that even without the feminaries they can recall the time when, as was typical of them, they made war. They say that all they need do is to invent



political action and analysis of the oppressor and oppressed even as it began to laud positive, transformative representations of lesbian community and female empowerment. Elaborate issue covers, for example, like the one from *Feminary* 8.2 (1977), pictured below (see Figure 2.1), illustrate a clear geographic and community divide between the city and the rural, wooded area. Indeed, these women gather and build sociality in a space that welcomes and fosters lesbian productivity and living—away from the industrialized, normativity-structured space of the city.

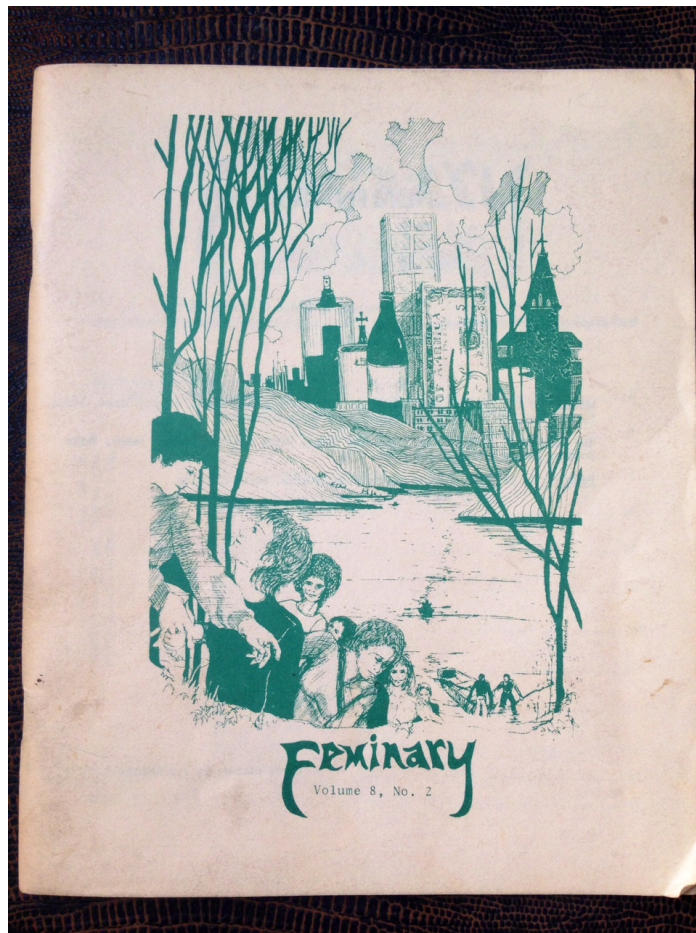


Figure 2.1 *Feminary* 8.2 (1977) Front cover.

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terms that describe themselves without conventional references to herbals or bestiaries. They say that this can be done without pretension. They say that what they must stress above all is their strength and their courage.” This issue marks the final title change.

Topic-based special issues devoted to “Women in a Male Environment,” “Southern Belles,” “Lesbian Community,” and “Southern Humor” were tackled during this period, signaling a more refined mimeographed printing form and narrowly focused mission—the characteristics of a cohesive literary journal devoted to examining how identity is explored, celebrated, and problematized as the southern experience and the lesbian experiences are entwined and inevitably, were in provocative and rich in juxtaposition. For example, the special issue devoted to “Lesbian Community,” addresses themes of silences, structures, and relationships, as it asks, “What (as opposed to ‘who’) is our community?”<sup>31</sup> The Feminarians made the important decision: as a lesbian collective, they could only talk knowledgeably about lesbian community. An article titled “On Vision,” deals with lesbian separatism and is a sensitive statement on another version of community that for some women is a component of lesbian sociality. Even so, the issue focuses heavily on inclusion, indicating that discussions of lesbian community revolved around positioning and placement—that is, looking for alternatives to male dominated social structures while keeping their organization’s borders open to “any women who want to join us for mutual nurturance and strength.”<sup>32</sup>

Many of the articles published in the “Lesbian Community” issue engage with thematics of silence, and the Feminarians come to realize the need for a written history—echoing the importance of counterarchive formation through publication and distribution. The issue’s center pages are left blank in recognition of the great silences, or “THE PAINFUL THINGS THAT PEOPLE COULD NOT WRITE DOWN. WE PUT THEM

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<sup>31</sup> *Feminary* 9.1 (1978).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* With this issue, the members of the collective are listed as: Lynn, Sherry, Mab, Helen, Susan, and Janet.

HERE TO REMIND OURSELVES AND OUR READERS THAT THIS ACCOUNT OF COMMUNITY IS INCOMPLETE.”<sup>33</sup> In attempting to combat these silences, or engage with them through a degree of personal as well as theoretical discussion, the Feminarians produced an issue that gives voice to community through the journal’s circulation.

Notably, the article “On Vision” from this special issue of lesbian community is reprinted from another North Carolina lesbian-feminist journal, *Sinister Wisdom*. This cross over in material illustrates the powerful momentum behind the Women In Print movement, a force that was robustly operating in North Carolina during this period. The article “Whole Women Press,” written by Feminarian Nancy Blood, provides clear evidence for the expansive reach of the journal, as well as the state and region’s flourishing lesbian-feminist print network. Nancy writes, “Going to the Women in Print conference during the summer of 1976 made us aware of the impact of women’s presses in communities all over the country.”<sup>34</sup> This article offers evidence that the collective members understood the impactful role and essential service that the journal provided their subscribers, even as they acknowledged their own “sense of personal pride from contributing to women’s media” through a network of feminist presses that again, suggests community via counterarchive formation.

Literary trends mirror culturally significant moments, and a later 1978 issue of *Feminary* unmistakably stressed a fully realized lesbian mission through its fresh subtitle,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

“A Feminist Journal For the South: Emphasizing the Lesbian Vision.” This shift is summarized in an announcement placed in the front matter:

As Southerners, as lesbians, and as women, we need to explore with others how our lives fit into a region about which we have great ambivalences—to share our anger and our love. We want to hear Southern lesbians tell the stories of women in the South—our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and friends. We feel we are products of Southern values and traditions but that, as lesbians, we contradict the destructive parts of those values and traditions...<sup>35</sup>

The call for lesbians to tell stories, as well as the valuing of past generation’s voices places this issue of *Feminary* squarely within a dialogue of community and counter-archive formation. *Feminary* is not only an example of a journal housed within LGBTQ collections in institutional or private archives, it is, in itself, an archive creating text.

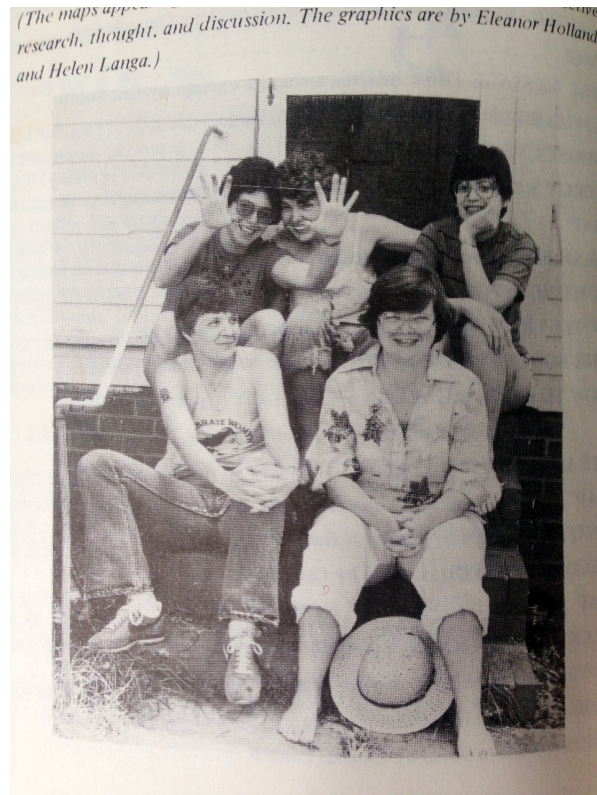


Figure 2.2 Members of the *Feminary* Collective 12.1 (1982): 4.

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<sup>35</sup> *Feminary* 10.1 (1978).

The ever-increasing expansiveness of the journal's content resulted in the foreclosure of locally based news and information that once characterized the early Triangle area newsletters. Simultaneously, however, the journal's deep investment in soliciting submissions heralded a rise in publications from women all over the South, giving readers and contributors a "space where lesbian women existed, spoke, and grew."<sup>36</sup> As energy for lesbian-feminist writing and publishing began to reach its peak, so too did new forms of literary production coalesce into existence. At a regional level, two watershed cultural events enhanced and defined *Feminary's* momentum in terms of production and content, shaping another era for the journal that was yet to come: the inaugural Southeastern Gay and Lesbian Conference held in Atlanta in 1978, and the Womanwrites conference in 1979. In the 1980 volume 10 issue 3 of *Feminary*, Mab Segrest writes of Womanwrites,

We had originally planned to have the conference in the fall, but finding a camp proved difficult: we were rejected by many of the YW's and Girl Scout camps in the Southeast, uneasy no doubt at the word "lesbian" spelled right out in our letters. (One more subtle approach that almost worked—one woman explained to the director of a private camp back in the mountains that it was a "feminist" conference, but "of course, probably" many of the participants would be lesbians, because "lesbians are in the forefront of the women's movement.") Seventy-five women met in a Georgia state park between June 14-17 of 1979; conference fee was \$15 for room and board. Meals met the approval of all but one of the participants, who suggested they were "too vegetarian and not enough coffee."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Powell, "Look What Happened Here" 92.

<sup>37</sup> *Feminary* vol. X no. 3 lists six women in the collective: Mab Segrest, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Wood-Thompson (sends regrets; not continuing on with the collective), Susan Ballinger, Cris South, Helen Langla, Deborah Giddens (new this year/issue). Most importantly, in this issue, Minnie Bruce Pratt mentions the change from a local journal to regional magazine with a national circulation.

These conferences and the women who organized and participated in them thrust the journal into a sexually specific standpoint with a literary slant, but also, tellingly, a regional one. In tandem, southern and lesbian—two fraught yet generatively rich identity descriptors—illustrated the interconnectivity of oppression and the Feminarians’ early awareness of it. *Feminary* took as its motivation the challenge inherent in assumptions surrounding southern stereotypes, demonstrating how problematic and limiting such ideologies could be. And in the process, the Feminarians created an archive through their gathering of southern lesbian stories even as they established a community through the production of the journal. A hypervisible vocabulary of lesbian related material dominated the journal during its later years, due, in part, to yet another change in the journal’s subtitle as well as the excitement and new energy generated by a stable core collective including Susan Ballinger, Cris South, Mab Segrest, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Helen Langla.<sup>38</sup>

*Feminary* 11. 1& 2, published in 1980 was a special issue centered on “Being Disobedient.” The small, three line ads in this volume, featured in the back matter of the journal, provide evidence of the journal’s national reach (see Figure 2.3). This journal was not merely written by and for southern lesbian feminists. It was produced within a temporal moment of increased feminist publishing, exemplified by the national Women In Print movement, and is a representative example of a lesbian journal from the South consumed and read in other parts of the country. We might imagine that the journals, organizations, women’s centers, and consciousness raising groups featured in the back matter of *Feminary*—with this issue as the ultimate example (indeed, previous issues did

not feature such an expansive variety ads or ads that showed such a broad geographic reach)—would have, in turn, advertised *Feminary* in their own pages and channels of communication. This system of lesbian sociality networking via print matter and community groups shows how *Feminary* would have undoubtedly circulated far and wide.

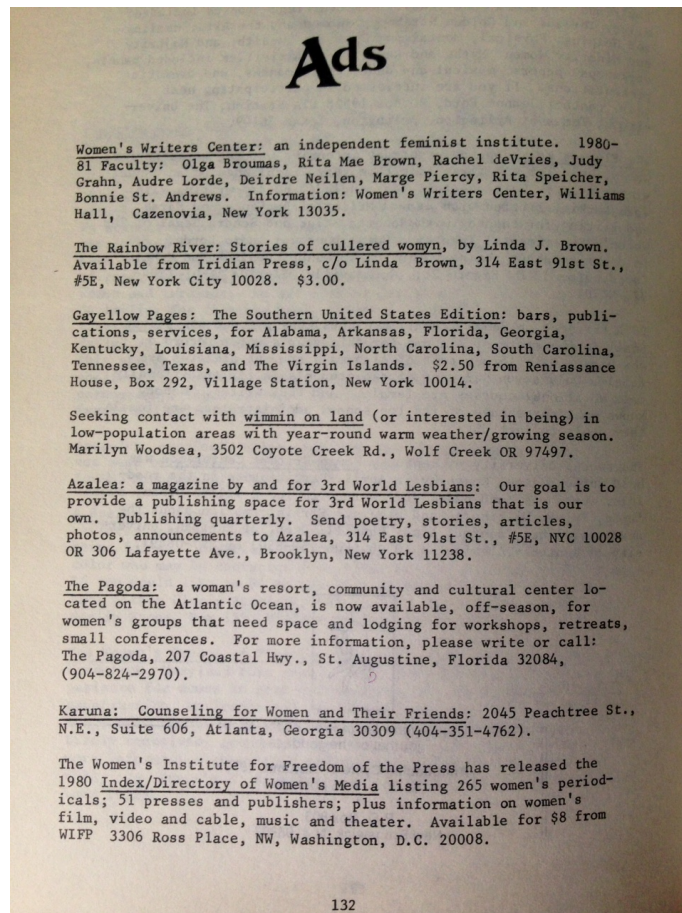


Figure 2.3 *Feminary* 11.1&2 (1980): 132.

However, the dawn of the 1980s witnessed the decline and eventual demise of *Feminary's* publication. Several more issues were released after the issue that detailed the collective members' experiences at the Womanwrites conference, but external factors began to take their toll as the circle of women producing the journal fragmented, in a large part due to divisive personal matters. Violent regional incidents, too, began to

occupy the members' thought and energies—in particular, how their efforts might be renegotiated and reconceptualized to more drastically address the need for local activism through protests and rallies. One such moment, commonly referred to as the “Little River” massacre, occurred in Durham in April of 1981. Four gay men sunbathing by the river were beaten with clubs by a group of four men and two women.<sup>39</sup> One man died. Members of the journal individually—and as always, collectively—responded to this violent shock in the local gay and lesbian community through the pages of *Feminary*, writing, “I have heard this crack on my skull my whole life long. But we survive.” In the statewide lesbian and gay community, their responses coalesced to generate North Carolina’s first Gay Pride March in Durham on June 27, 1981.<sup>40</sup> That same year, the Atlanta City Council declared June 26th “Lesbian, Gay Male and Transperson Pride Day” where “3,000 march in Atlanta, 60,000 in Houston.”<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps befittingly, the final issue of *Feminary* produced in and for the South was issued in 1982 and had as its special topic, “The South as Home: Staying or Leaving.”<sup>42</sup> The proceeding few years marked a decrease in members, as the collective shrank from nine women including Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Ballinger, Eleanor Holland, Helen Langa, Deborah Giddens, Raymina Y. Mays, Mab Segrest, Cris South, and Aida Wakil to

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<sup>39</sup> *Feminary* 11. 3 (1981). Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>40</sup> Gilbert, *Feminary of Durham-Chapel Hill* 72.

<sup>41</sup> *Feminary* 12. 1 (1982).

<sup>42</sup> After the final collective members disbanded, *Feminary* transferred to a San Francisco feminist publishing initiative in 1985, providing clear evidence for the South and southern lesbian literary productions as pioneering and nationally relevant.



just five.<sup>43</sup> In the “collective comments” introductory section, Cris South muses, “The South is our home...What about all of the other women, women who are here, women who have left, and women who have returned?”<sup>44</sup> These musings are especially meditative given that this was the last issue of the journal, although these questions remain central to my study, particularly concerning the subject as archive, and archive as community formation.

The journal chapters that follow predominantly feature works of fiction, although several hand drawn maps are strategically placed between some thirty or so works. These maps demarcate states and state lines within the region; four of the five feature words mapped onto the geographic renderings. The first map lists repeating, capitalized words with strong negative valiances: MASSACRES, DESECRATION, KEEP YOUR PLACE, DISSAPPEARANCE, DRIVEN OUT, SEGREGATION, ON DISPLAY, SURROUNDED, CONFINED.<sup>45</sup> The second map posits an unsubtle juxtaposition of two racialized Souths: one with only white negative space, and the other, completely opaque and overlaid with black ink.<sup>46</sup> The third map lists non-capitalized words including tobacco, cotton, textiles, coal, interlaced with the phrase “money crop.”<sup>47</sup> Each map offers a different cultural history of the region, modeling intersectionalities of class, race,

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<sup>43</sup> *Feminary* (12.1, 1982). Deborah decided to move to Georgia, leaving Mab, Helen, Cris, Minnie Bruce, and Eleanor—the final five.

<sup>44</sup> *Feminary* (12.1, 1982), Human Sexuality Collection, A Division of the Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

and economy. The hypervisible south is represented in the final rendering as a standard map, where southern states are sketched in their traditional, city-detailed topographies. Readers, however, are aware of the many Souths inscribed on earlier maps, illustrating how the region is understood, discussed, and perceived both from outside and within.

Notably, this issue contains several features that would later comprise a now recognizable body of southern lesbian literature—in particular, one of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s trio of poems written between 1981 and 1985 entitled “READING MAPS: TWO,” which she dedicated to Mab Segrest. Segrest devotes pages to explicating those poems in her essay collection *My Momma’s Dead Squirrel*, published three years later by Firebrand Press. In “READING MAPS: TWO,” Pratt recalls a trip “on the back road between Opelika and Clanton” with her then seventy year old mother, wondering “What does she know/ that she has not told me? memories locked/ in her heart/ like letters in the cedar chest, words faded/ to brown ink.”<sup>48</sup> As Alabama’s natural landscape gives way to plastic bags on the side of narrow, red clay roads, Pratt’s reflective words evoke archival imagery: personal knowledge as a repository of feeling and subjective history. Pratt yearns for answers in this poem, seeking knowledge and truth from a past that is not as clear as the littered, yet open path they travel. Indeed, her own path is one of continued self-discovery, but also of continued indirection, as she finds herself “trying to find my way by guess/ and memory.”<sup>49</sup> These poems show Pratt “exploring the metaphor of territory as the ground on which these choices emerge. These are also fugitive poems by a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 123.

poet both driving (a VW), and driven, to find an end to suffering.”<sup>50</sup> Pratt interweaves harrowing, prison industrial complex racial imagery with family memories: her grandfather, a security guard at a Bessemer steel mill, walking the fence with shotgun in hand to patrol lock-ironed prisoners leased from the state.<sup>51</sup> She reveals the unjust hidden roads of the Choctaw people: walking, driven out of their woods.<sup>52</sup> She interweaves her own tormented, personal narrative: “when I said/ the word lesbian, she wanted to hear no more/ in this life, not a word to her people.”<sup>53</sup> She wonders at the silences left unspoken by relatives watching history unfold from their porches—complicit in these silenced identities—even as she comes out of silence to express her lesbian identity to her mother. She is met with silence. In these poems, Pratt embraces the stylistics of silence and thus speaks them; her poem itself breaks the silences that litter her emotional landscape. Pratt seeks to get home through uncharted terrain—the unspoken landscape of southern lesbian identity. Through her memory exploration, she traces this trail to a formative circle of women from her past—her family—and yet a duplicate meaning is distinguishable here. Another identity shaping group of women existed in her present, one that joined in, and, in some respects, led a national conversation: the collective members of *Feminary*. These women broke their own silences to interweave their regional and sexual histories as nationally relevant stories.

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<sup>50</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985) 126.

<sup>51</sup> *Feminary* (12.1, 1982) 122.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

We are always writing ourselves into history. The collective members of *Feminary* reached beyond their regional literary audience—a revolutionary feat in itself, one that emerged on so many levels (the local community, a regional community, as part of nationwide reconceptualization initiatives for women to assert their lives and identities as politically salient, hypervisible beings). They reached within themselves. For them, the journal was personal and political, private and public, reflective and radical. It engaged with issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and motherhood—adding southern lesbian voices to an ongoing national conversation. Most importantly, *Feminary* produced something else alongside and within its very pages: sociality. Readers connected and writers connected over a common product that validated their existence and ethics. In the process of literary production, they produced a community.

CHAPTER THREE  
PUT A TASTE OF THE SOUTH IN YOUR MOUTH:  
CARNAL APPETITES AND INTERSEXUALITY

There's good & bad things about the south/ And some leave a bitter taste in my mouth...  
But we won't talk about that 'cause it's understood/ Everybody hear about the bad but  
what about the good?<sup>1</sup>

In *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine explores cultural consumerism through Mama Dip's Kitchen, located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where, with a spoonful of erotic innuendo, "diners are invited to 'put a taste of the South in your mouth.'"<sup>2</sup> In a special double issue of *The Southern Quarterly* devoted to *The Texts of Southern Food*, Patricia Yaeger evokes childhood kitchen memories in "Edible Labor," blurring lines between the body and biscuit batter:

Even the biscuits—fluffy as popcorn—reeked of my grandmother's body. Her puffy arms swung too and fro as she kneaded the dough, and I grew dizzy watching her. Which was arm, and which was batter? How to tell flesh from dough or rough skin from biscuit crust?<sup>3</sup>

Romine and Yaeger narrow in on a concept that powerfully resonates with literary representations of lesbian hypervisibility explored in this chapter: food is memory, and both a key marker and component of identity and community. And yet, like the concept of an authentic South, there is no real agreed upon Taste of The South—food is either southern or it isn't. Southerners either cook it often or they don't. And yet, certain foods and dishes retain a somewhat recognizable southernness—grits, I think, are paradigmatic. Ask southerners "what is southern food?" and they will likely respond with specific

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<sup>1</sup> JR. Walker & the All Stars single, "Way Back Home" (1971).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008) 108.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Yaeger, "Edible Labor" *The Southern Quarterly* 30 2-3 (1992): 150.

foodways—corn and hog meat, sweet tea, or barbeque—for “as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as Southerners, food has been central to the region’s image, its personality, and its character.”<sup>4</sup>

Food traditions in the region are invariably linked with another tradition that still has some meaning for southerners: hospitality. It is an elusive principle, recognizable but not easily definable. Sharing food and drink with others, showing love through cooking, retaining a sense of pride in passing cookbooks down through generations of women, and understanding food and eating as central to giving identity to entire communities emphasizes the role of food in the southern regional imaginary. In a collection of short stories titled *Trash* (1988), Dorothy Allison makes plain this correlation: “food is more than sustenance: it is a history. I remember women by what we ate together, what they dug out of the freezer after we made love for hours.”<sup>5</sup>

John T. Edge and Elizabeth Englehardt’s field-forging book *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from The American South* explicitly links southern foodways taxonomies with cultural processes and the production of communal relations: “the study of why we eat, what we eat, and what it means” directly re-inscribes “social interactions and cultural exchanges.”<sup>6</sup> Englehardt notes that “for academic audiences focused on examining and criticizing dietary habits and patterns of exclusion,” southern food studies

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<sup>4</sup> John Egerton, *Southern Food* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987) 2.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Trash* (New York: Plume, 2002) 120-2.

<sup>6</sup> John T. Edge and Elizabeth Englehardt, eds., *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014) 1-2.

“offer approaches to race, class, gender, and ethnicity.”<sup>7</sup> Problematically, as a critical node for analyzing southern sociality, and despite all the attention on the pleasure of food, sexuality is elided.

But such connections are far from elided in fiction and poetry by post-Civil Rights era southern lesbian authors. Both of the opening quotations from Romine and Yaeger suggest two concurrent strains of thought that pertain to the surface and close readings of poems and fiction in this chapter, works that illustrate what we get by putting the South in our mouths: Yaeger evokes a “foodways” approach where food is immensely salient to memory/history, while Romine evokes *expectations* (imagery/stereotype/association) and rhetorical manipulation (particularly marketing) of those expectations. Both approaches are important for understanding why *southern* food is so significant in the poetry and fiction of southern lesbian writers.

This chapter calls attention to representations of food in literary productions as an especially apropos lens for examining lesbian sex and sociality assertions—not in terms of exclusion, but instead, with regard to inclusivity: focusing on how community, sex, and region intersected and produced ways of being and belonging in late-century writing by southern lesbians. The fiction and poems I examine here intricately illuminate how “eating, writing, and loving can and must be brought together” to place sex at the center of intersectionalities, or what I coin *intersexationalities*.<sup>8</sup> As such, these literary productions engage with Elizabeth Grosz’s reconfiguration of lesbian desire, or the drawing together of bodies, pleasures, surfaces, and intensities: formulated contiguously

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetities: Food/Sex/Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 5.

“with and a part of other relations...the bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space; sexuality and desire are a part of the intensity and passion of life itself.”<sup>9</sup> Explicitness is crucial. Here I seek to develop a line of thinking that interweaves the lesbian body, eating, and food with affective resonances that celebrate and appreciate tactile sensations, the sense of timing that is so important in loving and eating, and the passion these writers have for southern food and satisfying sex.

In these works, several of which appeared first in the pages of *Feminary*, lesbian sexuality (and the lesbian body) is not posited as a lack, but as a production—energies and pulses that produce, generate, containing history and memory—within a specific space. Significantly, Grosz’s formulation of lesbian desire opens up multitudinous spaces as sites for sexuality—including the South. The writers I examine in this chapter draw together metaphors linking the intensity of lesbian desire with a passion for southern food. Looking at and with lesbian hypervisibility represented through the vehicle of food in these poems, with the region functioning as a tenor concept, we see writers exploring the tangible connections, social dimensions, and affective possibilities that thinking sex through southern food reveals.

Food and sex are nothing if not intimately linked. Both involve hunger—cravings for satiation, nourishment, and fulfillment. Both convey a sense of pleasurable sustenance; food is often paired with explorative sex, and sex is sometimes prefaced or concluded by the act of eating. Additionally, with regard to preference and choice, each suggests a great deal about who we are and where we come from. While sexually euphemistic food clichés and puns proliferate in social rhetoric, the axiom “you are what

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Refiguring Lesbian Desire,” *Space, Time, and Diversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 181.



you eat” persists as the customary means of self-examining our consumptive relationship to food. Foodstuffs, including peaches, plums, oysters, sausages, bananas, and meatballs, metaphorically signal sexually specific areas of the body—ultimately delineating a food-consciousness in how the sexed body is perceived. In *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*, Elspeth Probyn explores this connectivity: “intensely social, boringly mundane, simple or complicated, at times eating seemingly connects us to the core of our selves.”<sup>10</sup> If our core selves then are articulated through taste, aesthetics, and an ethics of consumption, the body—as a site of our sexual acts and behaviors—functions as a playground for our most basic human drives, whether carnal or alimentary. While other scholars have already begun to think about how food both fundamentally and problematically fits within and outside the configuration of bodies and identity formations, placing lesbian eroticism and sex at the center of these discussions reveals much about region and sociality.

Considering a politics of sexuality rooted in food and eating, or in production and consumption, foregrounds the role of the body in new ways. Multiple tactile and sensory experiences interweave through alimentary practices—themselves a cacophony of feelings, thoughts, textures, scents, and excesses—revealing the extent to which individuals experience sensation and satisfaction through food and eating. What we put into our mouths, how much of it, and obsessions surrounding what comes out of our bodies are commonplace considerations of materiality, as our eating bodies are constantly in flux. Similar changes could be seen in our bodies during and after sex. In *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (2012), Kyla Wazana Tompkins

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<sup>10</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites* 1.

demarcates the boundaries between food and eating, calling scholars to shift toward a framework that weds food studies to body theory, allowing a “critique of the political beliefs and structures that underlie eating as a social practice.”<sup>11</sup> As the lesbian literary productions examined in this chapter clearly illustrate, eating functions simultaneously as a cultural process and a biological one, as the body maps desire, appetite, and erotic/alimentary pleasure alongside the production of group formation, affirmation, and delineation. The medium for the map is southern food, as exemplified by this sketch from a 1982 issue of *Feminary*, where southern foods and crops are literally mapped onto a state demarcated region (see figure 3.1 below).

Beyond the body, in thinking sex and region through food, it is perhaps most useful to examine how eating offers a way to consider sexual difference in the social realm, for “examining the political and cultural meaning of eating culture...opens up a multitude of questions central to critical reflection about the production of asymmetrical social relations, both historical and contemporary.”<sup>12</sup> These multitudes of questions are tied to the production of social relations in nuanced ways, requiring precision and articulation of intersectionalities including sexuality: for example, how specific foods suggest class, how food is made and who gets to eat it along axes of race and ethnicity, and finally, how reflecting on food and eating have been used to produce sites of belonging, relationships, and orientation.

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<sup>11</sup> Kyla Wazana Thompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012) 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

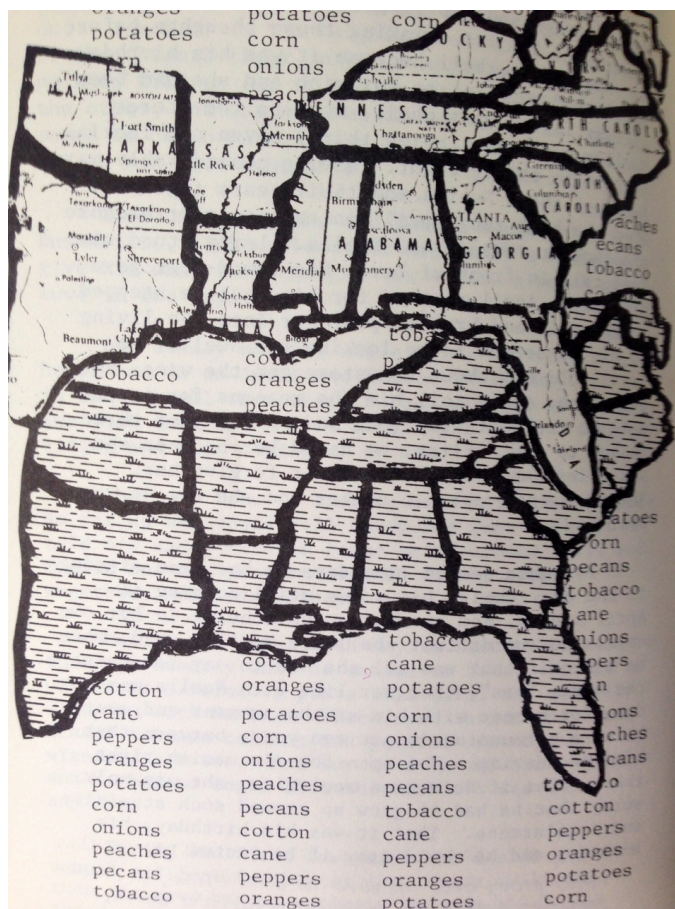


Figure 3.1 from *Feminary* 12. 1 (1982): 62.

Tracing these interconnections between food, eating, and the body—as well as points of disconnection—reveals the numerous ways we variously inhabit our sexualities. They reveal, too, the multiple identity axes that have long begged for reinvigorating conceptual frames: gender relations, economic status and class, geopolitical location, ethnicity, and race. These hallmarks of cultural analysis allow us examine how we occupy intersecting identity markers simultaneously, suggesting complex sites of community formation while “rooting actual bodies within these relations.”<sup>13</sup>

An examination of the social function of food is by no means a simple task, although thinking about food is a practical return to the everyday. Whether it suggests

<sup>13</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites* 9.

experimentation or the commonplace, food signifies a pleasure of practice. It symbolizes culture, memory, and imagined communities. Food orients us to our personal, individualized selves, while gesturing toward and resisting cohesive definitional meanings at local, regional, and national levels.<sup>14</sup> Food illuminates the boundaries and borders surrounding class, race, gender, and regional discourses, calling attention to and even complicating them. Our experiences with and through food, what food suggests about who we are, where we come from, what we like and dislike, the varying ways in which these preferences are conveyed, and certainly too, foodstuffs as metaphor for sexuality and desire suggest a complex web of interconnected identities mediated by systems of relationships and conditional relationalities. As the writers examined in this chapter demonstrate, thinking sex through food expands the possibilities for negotiating lesbian sexuality beyond the individual body and into the social realm, as diverse practices and behaviors surrounding eating intricately coalesce to reveal how we inhabit various identity axes.

If we “stand detached” from sexuality and “bracket its familiarity” within the multiple identity forming sites and fracturing spaces that a model of thinking food reveals, we begin to develop a politics of sexuality rooted in connection and disconnection, where bodies live in food and sex knowledge and through structures of intense sociality.<sup>15</sup> I argue that in thinking lesbian sex through the vehicle of food in these works, we see the production of sociality even as we see women’s bodies celebrated through eating and loving. In these works, sex is the epicenter of intersectionalities that

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<sup>14</sup> Englehardt, *A Mess of Greens* 15.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books reissue edition, 1990) 3.

include region, sociality and community, and food. Hypervisible representations of lesbian sexuality in these poems exude the centrality of pleasure, and the material play of identity exemplified through the consumption of southern food. Hypervisible representations of lesbian sexuality in these poems also amplify the legacies of southern food, thus offering regional approaches to studying other identity axes including race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

Incorporated within my larger arguments about *Southern Sapphisms*, these claims about the interrelatedness of southern food and lesbian sex are doubly rich. There are two main currents flowing throughout this project: the first, is that these writers have made and have been part of an important period of activism for the larger feminist movement (indeed, these southern lesbian writers were on the forefront of that movement—not on its margins, as they have been portrayed if their contributions are portrayed at all). Second, that for these writers, southernness is a critical context for their work, its rhetorical intentions, and its overall effect. In other words, the writers and their writings are meaningful, even central, to the national story of lesbian historiography, and their regional context is significant to better understanding their work and its relation to the national story.

The poetry and fiction in this chapter—characterized by lesbian hypervisibility, the representation of southern food as memory, the evocation of southern food with its many expectations and associations, and the work of a burgeoning lesbian-feminist community bravely writing explicit, “outer limits” sex acts—must be understood within a national frame. During the 1980s, at the height of the polarizing feminist Sex Wars, these southern writers challenged the marginal status of lesbians—and the marginalized

positioning of certain sex acts—through their writings, in an effort to create a transformed lesbian society and a more honest body of lesbian literature that told the truth about sex in a visible, public way.<sup>16</sup> They did so by hypervisibly foregrounding specific sex acts which had, to that point, been considered not only non-feminist, but within the realm of a male, heterosexual sex repertoire: oral sex, anal sex, and kink.

In *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*, Allison laments a lack of truth and explicitness in the “brave new world of lesbian fiction,” saying, “Love stories, grief and memory stories, sensual memory stories, one that played on the words *eating her*, featuring the body of the beloved, newly dead, cooked up as stew and savored—non-explicit to the point of obscurity.”<sup>17</sup> By honing in on what they knew best—region, southern food—and drawing on the expectations of region and southern food through hypervisible imagery and commonplace associations, the lesbian writers I explore in this chapter truly brought flesh and texture to the act of eating.

### **Eros and Eating, Or You Eat What You Are**

There are several considerations in thinking through food as one means for examining sociality, and the study of food has encapsulated much critical thought. In an effort to acknowledge aspects of this thought, and how it might attenuate or present limits

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<sup>16</sup> For a lengthier discussion of the Feminist Sex Wars or the Lesbian Sex Wars, see Lisa Duggan’s *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Carole S. Vance’s canonical edited collection, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1984), and Jane F. Gerhard’s *Desiring revolution: second-wave feminism and the rewriting of American sexual thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, & Literature* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1994) 89.

to my analysis, I will outline a few prominent theories. Roland Barthes suggests that food is always bound to social relations of power, having a constant tendency to lend and transform itself to given situations, revealing “a representation of contemporary existence is implied in the consciousness we have of the function of food.”<sup>18</sup> Arjun Appadurai cautions against a conceiving food as a universality, warning of the homogenizing risk in the idea that everyone must eat, while Mary Douglas reminds us that consuming food is a corporeal act that often invites an overly cultural reading, stating “Food is not only a metaphor or vehicle of communication; a meal is a physical event.”<sup>19</sup>

Along these lines of physicality, Kristeva develops her notion of the abject, and by extension, those bodily processes which disrupt social order, into three categories: abjection in relation to food, to waste, and to sexual difference. The subject erects defenses against these abjections, striving for a clean and proper social body according to the conformist norms of a heterosexist, homogenized, and sanitized culture. Grosz continues this line of reasoning, stating, “they [abject functions] are enduring; they are necessary but embarrassing. They are undignified, nonpoetic, daily attributes of existence, rich or poor, black or white, man or woman, that all must, in different ways, face, live with, and reconcile themselves to.”<sup>20</sup> Here, we see that the abject is universal in

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<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” *Food and drink in History: Selections from the Annales, economies, societies, civilizations, Vol. 5* eds. R. Forster and O. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961) 171.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Douglas, “Food in the Social Order,” *Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities*, Mary Douglas, ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984) 11.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Refiguring Bodies,” *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992) 194.

the way that it is linked to shared experiences of the body, as well as the social and culturally specific meanings of the body—similar to food’s paradoxical relationship to absolute universality and absolute individuality. At a basic, primitive level, we all must eat— although the what, how, when, why, are radically subjective considerations. This is what makes food and eating metaphors in southern lesbian literature such particularly rich sites for exploring and asserting both intersubjective and communal identity.

The communities that shape identity are not always welcome or welcoming ones. Self, family, and heterosexist, patriarchal culture are sources of affective anger in Allison’s collection *The Women Who Hate Me* (1991). Her poems are seductively engaging for their emotional, linguistic precision, yet violently explicit imagery shocks the reader from that word-spell. Written between 1981 and the summer of 1983 following her participation in the landmark and controversial feminist conference, Scholar and the Feminist Conference IX, held at Barnard College in New York, Allison’s collection primarily evokes the pleasures and dangers in lesbian relationships. At face value, the majority of these poems focus tightly on demystifying lesbian romanticism: “I do not believe anymore in the natural superiority / of the lesbian,” she writes in the title poem, “The Women.”<sup>21</sup> Other poems in the collection analogously trigger a sense of poignant resentment, including topics on childhood sexual abuse, class struggle, and volatile female relationships to feminism and truth. Of the collected twenty-seven poems, four prominently feature food in their titles: “dumpling child,” “appetite,” “tomato song,” and “butter my tongue.” Southern foodstuffs are repeatedly and explicitly used to signal

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<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Allison, *The Women Who Hate Me, Poetry: 1980-1990* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1991) 23.



the poetics of food and sex throughout the collection: "...will you slide your cabbage hands over my belly / your dirty mouth up my thigh?"<sup>22</sup> Far from sublimating or substituting for sexual practice, such imagery foregrounds it, rendering lesbian sexual activity hypervisible. Relieved of searching for the *what* of sexuality, we are freed to focus on the *how*—that is, how the intersections of region, sexuality and sociality are conveyed and inevitably, are in tension.

Examining "dumpling child" for its literal meaning is an exercise in descriptive carnal desires. Born in Greenville, South Carolina and raised in Florida, Allison has a southern heritage that is echoed vis-à-vis comfort food in the poem. Her use of food imagery overwhelmingly gestures toward regional cuisine, brining lesbian experiences viscerally to life in an assertion of shared gustatory heritage and, thus, community. The first five lines of the poem describe down home Southern cooking as a primary constituent of identity:

A southern dumpling child  
biscuit eater, tea sipper  
okra slicer, gravy dipper,  
I fry my potatoes with onions  
stew my greens with pork.<sup>23</sup>

The use of "child" suggests a nostalgic orientation toward southern food, while the noun-verbs "eater, sipper, slicer, dipper" indicate a doer behind the action, a regional subject. Pork laced greens are particularly relevant to understanding Allison's roots as a "whitetrash, no-account" southerner—greens are inexpensive and thus widely accessible

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7. I have made every effort in this chapter to accurately represent the textual placement of these poems and fiction as they physically appear on the original page, keeping in mind the author's intentions with regard to form techniques.

to the lower classes in comparison to high brow dishes such as Spinach Madeline.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, signaling wealth and class—or aspirations thereof—collard greens are traditionally eaten on New Year’s Day, to ensure good fortune in the coming year.

Allison concretely embraces regional food specialties—okra and tea, biscuits and milk gravy—indicating their centrality to both her individual tastes and her southern subjectivity.

The relationship between food and sex in this poem is even more explicit when considerations of affective sensory pleasures, tastes, and textures come into play. Just the assonance of words like “biscuit,” “sipper,” and “dipper” evokes euphemistic ways of reading: the repeated sounds link the food and the eater just as the poem links culinary imagery with lovers.<sup>25</sup> Considering the poem at face value and analyzing its types of food for their literal meaning, it is clear that Allison blends salty flavors with savory ones—the flake of a briny biscuit, the thick consistency of flavorful gravy sauce.

Taste is quintessentially intrinsic to food and sex—what you like and what you do not like—both inside and outside of the kitchen and bedroom.<sup>26</sup> The longer second stanza melds food memories with erotic lesbian passion. Allison’s lover tastes sweet like

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 23, and Bunny Crumpacker, *The Sex Life of Food: When Body and Soul Meet to Eat* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2006) 8.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the subtleties of rural Southern sound, see Southern Culture on the Skids’ unapologetic rockabilly song, “Biscuit Eater” (1992).

<sup>26</sup> While this chapter is not the place for a discussion of the de-essentializing possibilities of sexuality, this matter of taste raises provocative questions about the nature of sexuality itself. Is it mainly a matter of “taste” (and thus preference, style, “choice,” etc)? See David Halperin’s *100 Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1989) for more on non-essentialist ideas of sexuality.

watermelon; sprinkling red watermelon with sea salt expands the palate in a time honored southern tradition:

and ride my lover high up  
on the butterfat shine of her thighs  
where her belly arches and sweetly tastes  
of rock salt on watermelon  
sunshine sharp teeth bite light  
and lick slow like mama's  
favorite dumpling child.<sup>27</sup>

“Her” thighs are polished like butter fat, the highest concentration of fatty cream in whole milk and velvety yellow butter; both lovers are white. Allison imparts a lush and indulgent female landscape where sex becomes a way to appreciate food and vice versa. Allison tastes her lover—slowly, she dines. The “sunshine sharp teeth bite light” as one’s mouth does into a succulent dish. A child eats with abandon, savoring favorite foods carelessly and messily, never thinking to count calories or refrain from consuming what tastes good. Children are often picky about what they eat, wanting to maximize the delight of consumption; adults, meanwhile, are often partial to foods not because of the direct sensory pleasure, but because they are nostalgically reminded of home and family.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Allison’s inclusion of foodstuffs in this poem symbolizes relief and region—southern food is comfort food—while connoting decadence. Allison makes visible the dual desires of food and sex as integral to her core self—not collapsing the two, but coupling each embodied, tactile experience to maximize their joint concupiscence.

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<sup>27</sup> Allison, *The Women* 7.

<sup>28</sup> Crumpacker, *The Sex Life of Food* 18.

Allison's memories of food are inescapably southern; lovemaking in the poem is affixed to and articulated through the vehicle of southern food, making her identity visible through this inextricable surface pairing. Thus she asserts lesbian southern identity as a part of the southern social realm, integrating sexual importance and validity while constructing a sexual identity she could be proud of and honest about—one that belonged to the broader feminist community and by extension, to the nation. Her work tells the story of southern lesbian desire and sex made palatable and celebrated through southern food—and affirmed through that regional tradition.

Allison continues to explore intersecting relationships between regional affiliation and lesbian identity in her poem “tomato song,” as setting and sense of place establish a fraught divide between urban New York and the provincial South. Caught in the balance, Allison muses that she “Might as well live up to my reputation” as a lesbian, as a southerner, and as an outsider on both scores.<sup>29</sup> Allison imagines herself wreaking havoc on the residents of New York, a hyperbolized figure wrecking bridges, ringing in the unwanted reign of a displaced, angry southern lesbian. It is important to emphasize here that Allison, as an explicitly southern lesbian, is not playing a catch-up game in the progressive city, but rather is at the forefront of challenging 1980s feminist and lesbian identity politics. Her reputation, and her experiences as a “white trash/no count/bastard” southerner with deviant S/M lesbian sexual desires were actively invalidated and negated by the lesbian-feminist movement at the time—one caught in a notorious scholar-activist

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<sup>29</sup> Allison, *The Women* 36.

debate surrounding sex negative and sex positive feminist politics.<sup>30</sup> Like “kind of a great red fruit” Allison envisions that she will

...grow a rage like a tomato  
bring down sauce  
on half the city  
tell low-down jokes  
proposition old ladies  
lick their cheeks, offer to  
climb up their skirts  
for free.<sup>31</sup>

Allison’s choice of a vine-ripened, juicy tomato is a strategic one—tomatoes are a fruit that would not typically thrive in New York’s concrete jungle. While she presents readers with the image of a single garden tomato, southerners might imagine fields filled with rows and rows of tomato crops ripe for the picking. Both images are as foreign to New York City as the imagery of Allison’s great, enraged tomato rolling up Broadway. Looking with the poem, Allison’s juxtaposes this ripe, hardy fruit alongside the hard streets of New York, suggesting the difficulty of non-normative desire in even the most progressive of cities, as well as regional and affective displacements she registers not only as southerner living in New York, but as someone writing sexuality in a national-level lesbian-feminist political moment. Sex was important, serious, a battleground, and writing was an act of self-discovery, self-revelation.<sup>32</sup>

This round, succulent, and crimson colored fruit is not only symbolic of Allison’s southern roots—“last but not least in the pantheon of Southern vegetables”—but of her

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>32</sup> Allison, *Skin* 39-40.

sexual identity and physiology as well.<sup>33</sup> Her tomato song in this poem is the lyrical melody of an angry vagina. Her rage is both literal and satirical, and above all, very public: she appropriates the stereotype that southerners, women, and in particular, lesbians, are irrational and overly emotional.<sup>34</sup> In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin writes “the grotesque is always satire. Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque.”<sup>35</sup>

Addressing a regional sexual context, Mab Segrest argues that the figure of the grotesque in southern literature only serves to further marginalize the already marginal: “I knew in my guts that my strongest feelings, for women and girls, put me somehow on the outside, set me apart. Although I did not know what *lesbian* was, I was a closeted freak.”<sup>36</sup> The grotesque body carries with it considerable potential for transgression—aligning the abject with the figural, the closeted with the exaggerated, and the normal with the

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<sup>33</sup> Egerton, *Southern Food* 310. In a July 2013 Southern Foodways Alliance blog, Virginia Willis calls the tomato an “iconic Southern food that defines summer.” See also the unique festival nature of the South—its insistence on food as an occasion for social celebration—and in particular, New Orleans’ decade-spanning French Market Creole Tomato Festival: “The French Market Creole Tomato Festival is a celebration of Louisiana’s produce, farmers and the Pelican State’s unique cultural and cuisine offerings, of which the Creole tomato is emblematic. Originally imported from the West Indies, the Creole tomato thrives in the rich alluvial soil and subtropical climate of south Louisiana, especially in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.”

<sup>34</sup> On southerners’ irrationality and violence, this is particularly true of white men: see, for example, Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986); but also white women, as recent representations of white women in the film *12 YEARS A SLAVE* (2013), etc., show.

<sup>35</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984) 36.

<sup>36</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985) 20.

freakish.<sup>37</sup> Expanding her fantasy self to grotesque proportions, Allison satirically embraces the social disorder one might expect from a southern lesbian's presence, body, and sexuality, although ostensibly, she's writing to other feminist-lesbians more broadly. In sarcastic and humorous tones, Allison's epic adventures in the poem satirize the chaos she imagines her very presence as a southern sex-positive S/M kink-loving lesbian might cause.

Color choice is a prominent element in "tomato song," as red is a hue that prodigiously symbolizes passion and sensuality, and at times, violence. Like the watermelon in "dumpling child," Allison's red, pulsing desire for women parallels the tomato as a source of vitality and nourishment—and in some senses, sexual and regional orientation. Much as the tomato literally sustains life, so too her vagina enlivens the pleasures of her body; her anger and her desire both stem from that place where blood pumps and pulses. She melds sources of strength, thoroughly infusing red, red arousal, anger, fruit, and southernness with oxygen and life. The poem concludes with Allison proclaiming that she will make no apologies about who she is as a sexual being, that there will be "nothing but me, my tomato, my rages,/ my name,/ my name."<sup>38</sup> She accepts and claims her lesbian and southern identities regardless of how she is perceived or (mis)understood. Reading with the grain, her pride is evident, if not—like a tomato—

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<sup>37</sup> For more on the role of the grotesque and its implications in southern lesbian literary productions, see in particular Mab Segrest's essay, "Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness" in *My Mama's Dead Squirrel* (1985). For a discussion of the southern gothic literary tradition in mid-century writers' work, see Allan Lloyd Smith's *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (2004), and for central problems and theoretical fields within the Gothic tradition, see Robert K. Martin's *American Gothic: New Interventions in National Narrative* (2009).

<sup>38</sup> Allison, *The Women* 36.

somewhat vulnerable to bruising.

Allison's poem "the terror of my enemies" expresses passion—spanning from sensuality to rage—through the vehicle of sensory receptors. Allison invites an army of lovers to enter her personal space, her bed, and her body. These women are separate from the enemies—homophobes and non-political mainstream society more generally, sex-negative, pro-censorship feminists more specifically—whom Allison believes incapable of accepting and supporting her sexual life as a lesbian with S/M kinks or the tenderness with which her feelings are sensually/sensorially relayed between partners. Sexuality in this poem is hypervisible, blunt, and on the surface. For readers, food elicits meaning and memory—a shared regional identity that appears as an anchor to envision how southern lesbian sexual identity is ventured, celebrated, and represented textually.<sup>39</sup>

Both desire and anger have the potential to become soul-consuming. The promise of consumption is inherently tied to the act of eating in the poem, where

I put my tongue,  
my hands to,  
the women whose hands

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<sup>39</sup> That food elicits these associations and evocations for readers is borne out in my experience of teaching these texts to students, for whom these foodways are deeply suggestive. In the spring of 2012 I received approval from the Department of English at LSU to teach a general education undergraduate fiction course with a special emphasis on queer sexualities in southern literature. I was given the opportunity to draw from my dissertation research on a wide range of theoretical and historical approaches that examine queer encounters, relationships, and behaviors in southern literary productions, and apply that knowledge to the classroom. I believed the overwhelming saturation of food with its regionally and sexually suggestive meanings in course texts warranted detailed attention in classroom discussions and lecture; moreover, I was deeply aware of my students' textual unfamiliarity and strived to present the material as intellectually palatable and creatively relatable. Food became a way to do it; I used the canny to teach the uncanny. While some students in the course may not have identified with the non-normative sexuality expressed in this poem, they could effortlessly and profoundly relate to the nostalgia of food.



widen and fill me,  
whose tongues suck salt  
to the surface  
of my skin.<sup>40</sup>

Eating, sucking, and licking evoke more than oral intercourse—Allison seemingly draws strength from skin’s salty surface, reinforcing sexual identity but the sense of belonging to a lesbian community.

For Allison, her lovers nourish the body’s emotional landscape much in the same way that food nourishes her physically. However, in this poem, it does not automatically follow that food and affective registers of emotion always fill the body with comfort and warmth. The first two tastes mentioned are incredibly disparate, signaling two diverse emotions. The saltiness of the skin evokes desire and lovemaking, while strawberry sweetness is contrasted with the satisfying taste of revenge. The fruitlike sweetness of revenge is described as something that is “measured cold and bitter sharp,” while at face value, salt suggests an abundance of sweat on hot skin.<sup>41</sup> It is not possible to “measure” the taste of salt on her lover; it is vast, infinite, and found everywhere. And yet the taste of revenge, and the “bone speed of my rage” is measured behind her tongue, strategically subject to calculation.

The blending of hands, tongues, and hips in “the terror of my enemies” unites lovers in a way that virtually makes them indistinguishable from one another. Allison embraces love and rage as two affective registers among many—clasping an emotional landscape peppered with shame, grief, rage, resentment, and fear—largely brought on by the dislocation she felt within the national lesbian-feminist community. While love and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 48.

rage are both expressed with a certain descriptive taste, a distinction is drawn: the strawberry sweetness of rage is not fulfilling in the same way that love is. Rage is an isolating, solitary taste—not a shared one. Class and privilege as well as entitlement and denial separated her from a wider, national feminist movement that increasingly became reactionary and exclusionary—not surprisingly, on the topic of sex. Drawing together the intensities and passions of life itself, Allison illustrates how she embodies rage and love irrespective of what society imagines those experiences to feel like, while powerfully defying her enemies within a feminist movement intent on publicly speaking out against politically incorrect sex. And in the 1980s, sex-negative feminists overwhelmingly considered oral sex between women incorrect and deviant—the act itself was invariably enmeshed in a heated national conversation surrounding the political meanings of acts and the radical nature of expressing and speaking them openly.<sup>42</sup> Such hypervisible representations of lesbian sex would have resonated strongly with pro-sex lesbian feminists, women who talked about explicit sexual desires—fetish specific and/or BDSM—and organized around them in the public sphere, building lesbian sociality through intersexuality and positing “radical sex itself as a sign of radical politics.”<sup>43</sup>

Minnie Bruce Pratt’s five-line poem “Peach,” from her collection *We Say We Love Each Other* offers another metaphorical comparison between a uniquely state-

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<sup>42</sup> See in particular Allison’s 1981 consciousness-raising group, Lesbian Sex Mafia, and Pat Califia’s groundbreaking book that championed for lesbian sadomasochistic sex, *Sapphisty*, published by the lesbian-feminist Naiad Press in 1980.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) 152.

specific southern food—Georgia peaches, anyone?—and lesbian oral/anal sex.<sup>44</sup>

According to Virginia Willis, cookbook author of *Bon Appétit, Y'all* (2008) and frequent contributor to *The Southern Foodways Alliance* blog, “I’m certainly biased toward Georgia peaches; it seems to me that the red clay soil and hot sun here create a taste like no other. In keeping with the region’s legendary sweet tooth, many Southern recipes can quickly turn the healthful peach into something terribly unvirtuous—though delicious.” This quotation recalls the injunction about putting the South in your mouth, and Pratt’s poem works with and against these associations while stressing the link between food and normative/virtuous and non-normative/non-virtuous sexual taboos:

My tongue, your ass:  
the center of a peach  
ripe, soft, pitted, red-fibred flesh  
dissolving toward earth, lust  
*Eat you?* I ask.<sup>45</sup>

The unvirtuous conflation of peach imagery and ass imagery in Pratt’s “Peach” illustrates the ways in which one’s tongue and ass are similar to a peach. Both are red, soft, and laden with small surface indentions. The center of the peach in this poem is pitted, characterized by absence, whereas the tongue fills the mouth. Indeed, looking at the very center of this poem, one notices absence: the pitted fruit, one’s pitted ass. The word pitted falls within the center of a five line poem: third line, third word. As an evocative focus for both the ass and peach, any lack or absence evidenced by the central placement of

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<sup>44</sup> Not only do peaches suggest a rather state-specific association in the regional sense, and sexually specific association in the corporeal sense, the fruit itself is frequently embodied as female and feminine. Consider Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Georgia Peaches” lyrics: “Well them Georgia peaches sure do got style/ They’ll steal your heart with a Southern smile/ Well they talk a little funny but they look so fine...”

<sup>45</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, *We Say We Love Each Other* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1985) 68.

“pitted” in fact only illuminates a need to fill, penetrate. And yet while the reader subconsciously sexualizes the peach—perhaps as a central, intended image—it is germane to consider how the tongue is ripe for hypersexualization: like “your ass,” “my tongue” is lustful, juicy, and rutted.

Notable, too, here is a matter of sequence, and questions of forbidden eating and the unvirtuous. The final line of the poem is proleptic, evidenced by the interrogative, “*Eat you?* I ask.” This act of oral anal sex has not yet been acted upon; it is a future act that has not yet been consummated. Unlike our speaker’s romantic attachment to peaches—her sultry tactile descriptions of sight and feel—there is a curious absence of taste sensations with regard to the ass. This speaks to the lack established and performed by “pitted” as the center of the poem. As an interrogative, “Eat you?” is not merely an acknowledged invitation—a polite seeking of consent—it is an incredulous one. Our speaker has never tasted ass, and the interrogative suggests that eating ass would taste as good as a peach would. Sexual taboo is evocatively surfaced—in our face as well as the speaker’s.

We might consider “Peach” at face value in terms of the sexual taboos it evokes, but the poem is also shockingly representative of a sexual conviction bravely steeped in validating her unvirtuous desire for kink. Consider how the adage “toss salad” serves as a colloquial referent to oral anal sex. Here again we see the rhetoric of food used to discuss the sexed body, or the sex act of licking/eating around or in the ass. In “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Rubin theorizes sex negativity endemic to Western culture, diagramming a hierarchical sexual value system oppressive to erotic misconduct and divergent sexual tastes. This hierarchy of sexual value—where

sex is determined to be a sinfully destructive force—operates in much of the same ways as do other ideological systems. Determined by a complex model, socially acceptable sex practices are dependent upon sex object choice (including sex, gender, race, and age), location, degree of familiarity, number of participants, and kind of experience. Rubin posits a diametrically oppositional frame: good, normal sex or “the charmed circle” as relationally superior to bad, abnormal sex or “the outer limits.”<sup>46</sup> Her work calls into question where oral/anal sex between lesbians would fall on a hierarchical table or circle. As a queer sex act, anal sex—at least in the popular imaginary—is frequently attributed to sex between men. The act itself is gendered, and in “Peach” we see a reversal of that attributive gender—much in the same way that peach imagery in the poem is overthrown, subverted, dare I say it—tossed—from its usual conflation with cunt to instead highlight a woman’s ass.

These intersecting taboos bring into focus how occupying the outer limit—lesbian oral/anal sex—is a position of critical periphery. Sexual behaviors classified outside of the charmed circle dispute the normative position of such problematically structured systems of desire. Their positions in fact constitute one another even as the outer limits call into question how they are both mutually constructed by society’s mores. This discussion is equally applicable to my previous readings of Allison’s poetry as well. In “Sex Writing, the Importance and the Difficulty,” Allison writes, “What was taboo? In what context? Sex had always been so risky. It had seemed enough just to pronounce myself a lesbian. Did I have to say what it was I truly desired, what I did and did not do,

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<sup>46</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Carole S. Vance ed. (London: Pandora Press, 1989) 13.

and why?”<sup>47</sup> Albeit from different angles, both Pratt and Allison are addressing what have been “the outer limits” of socially acceptable sexuality—foregrounding the intersection of not only non-normative sexual identities, but also non-normative sexual acts in what would have been a highly disputed emergent world of lesbian fiction—ultimately centering them, or at the very least, declaring them as legitimate and therefore, visible.

Pratt’s poem, “Plum,” strategically placed on the page opposite “Peach,” is comprised of two sentences:

I love the way you  
give me cold plums. I love the  
way you give me tongues.<sup>48</sup>

Here again, relieved of searching for sexuality, we see an exuberant celebration of lesbian sex acts metaphorically juxtaposed against commonplace table fruit. Reading with the grain of the poem, and of curve of the plum itself, we see Pratt gesturing toward oral sex between women as forbidden fruit: frisky, challenging, ironic, and wide open to sensations including hot and cold temperature play. Contrasting ice play with a cold plum, Pratt intimately shares with readers an expansive sexual repertoire laced with flairs of sexual kink.

Looking with Pratt’s poem, “Blueberries,” we as readers become more than voyeurs in the sumptuous interplay—we participate. As Pratt looks at her lover eyeing the glistening, rounded blueberries, so, too, do we as readers see the intimate exchange:

Love, I know you well: how you look, desiring,

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<sup>47</sup> Allison, *Skin* 89.

<sup>48</sup> Pratt, *We Say We Love Each Other* 69.

upper lip lengthened when you look at what you  
want: some wet fat blueberries heaped in bowls, or  
me, at times, we too.<sup>49</sup>

Through lesbian hypervisibility in this poem, readers know her lover's look of desire—even if we do not know Pratt's lover (certainly not as well as she does). Lesbian sexuality in Pratt's poetry from *We Say We Love Each Other* is energized through the vehicle of southern food; she invents desire as part of the passion of eating, whether bodies or fruit. Focusing on the sensual details of life, Pratt's "Peach," "Plum," and "Blueberries" exhibit an assemblage of fruits swept up in the intensity of lesbian desire—commonplace table fruits are hypersexualized. The sheer force of lesbian eroticism in these works speak to Grosz's reconfiguration of lesbian desire as she asks,

the question is not am I...a lesbian, but rather, what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energies, and bodies in... and what other kinds of bodies, and to what effects? ...what it is that together, in parts and bits, in interconnections, we can make that is new, exploratory, opens up further spaces, induces further intensities, speeds up, enervates, and proliferates production...<sup>50</sup>

The power of these poems lies in their multitude of associations: drawing together surfaces through intersexuality, the skin of a woman's body similar to the skin of a fruit's peel, the flesh of both, the tactile sensations of eating warm or cool.

Continuing to explore the carnal intersexuality proliferating in southern food, lesbian sexual identity, and unvirtuous, pleasurable acts described in literary productions—enervated specifically within a lens of succulent fruits—centralizes Doris Davenport's three-stanza poem, "Blackberry Time." According to *The Companion to*

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>50</sup> Grosz, "Refiguring Lesbian Desire" 184.

*Southern Literature*, Davenport is a “lesser-known but important southern lesbian poet” who was born in Gainesville, Florida.<sup>51</sup> While Davenport’s six collections of poetry, in particular her self-published works *it’s like this* (1980), *eat thunder & drink rain* (1982), and *Voodoo Chile: Slight Return* (1991), have been neglected in contemporary literary criticism on the women’s liberation movement and black arts movement, as well as within a wider body of southern literature, her work is ripe for examining southern lesbian sociality and race.<sup>52</sup> Her contribution to the nationally groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) titled “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin,” linked late 1970s and early 1980s era feminisms with the lived experiences of women negotiating institutional and personal racism within a regional framework. Writing from subjective perspective, and addressing the disparate struggles white women and women of color felt within a changing feminist movement

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<sup>51</sup> Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, Todd W. Taylor, eds., *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) 429.

<sup>52</sup> In the front matter of *Voodoo Chile* (1991), C. Asungi writes, “And to get finally to the CENTER of my point; given doris’ ‘gift of insight’ and skill at her ‘craft,’ there is no SANE reason that I can find for doris’ having to ‘self-publish’ THIS manuscript, and fortunately, she hasn’t let THIS slight be a deterrent either, but Doris says it better than I in her poem, ‘about my manuscript rejected for the sixth time by seven *alternative* feminist-black-lesbian-small-press-publishers.” The *Companion to Southern Literature* notes, “Although her books met many rejections even at the hands of small black presses, she persevered by publishing her own work” (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 429). Without fully knowing, we might infer—given the cultural moment from whence these collections were written—Davenport’s difficulties in getting published might have resulted from her positionality as a double minority: small black presses arguably rejected the lesbian content of her poetry, while small lesbian presses might have rejected her work through institutionalized racism. This is, of course, speculation, but it bears noting, given that Davenport is the only black lesbian poet within this temporal frame (that I have been able to locate) who frames her lesbian sexuality through the vehicle of southern food.



challenged what Allison has called “the same old, slightly distant, and carefully respectable aura of feminist theory”<sup>53</sup> That defiant voice—declaring and reveling in explicitness, expanding and shifting early 1970s and 1980s mainstream feminisms—encompasses Davenport’s erogenous poetry.

The wide availability of fruits and berries in the South extends to table accompaniments including jams, jellies, and preserves. Indeed, the processes of drying, salting, stewing, boiling, pickling, potting, freezing, and canning are southern traditions dating from the early 1800s until the post-World War II era, when food was “put up” for later consumption.<sup>54</sup> One of the preserves and jellies that is closely identified with the South is blackberry jam. Blackberries were found “growing in Virginia 380 years ago by the first English settlers,” and the very ripest of blackberries are naturally sweet.<sup>55</sup> Davenport exuberantly and playfully trades on the expectation of blackberry sweetness in her poem, paralleling southern sun ripened imagery associations with a woman’s sexual readiness:

at a certain time in summer  
they grow wild  
& lush everywhere each tiny  
grain filled with black  
juice / each little bubble a  
huge berry

blackberries wild and loose –  
mixed with honeysuckles & weeds &  
all you have to do  
is fight off a few bugs, pick off  
a few stuck in the juice to get

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<sup>53</sup> Allison, *Skin* 115.

<sup>54</sup> Egerton, *Southern Food* 179.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

a mouthstained purple-black  
smiling over that  
juice / hot &  
sensuous to the tongue & throat  
& bare brown feet

at that time in summer  
when black berries will  
again  
grow wild, free, unfenced  
& unpolluted i  
can find you  
in honeysuckles & weeds &  
know again your  
hot sweetness.<sup>56</sup>

Soft, erotic tones of southernness work us, the readers, over with honest, lesbian hypervisibility. The adage “eating out” takes on a new layer as the affinity between berries and sugar, the clit or “huge berry,” and corporeal juices crystalizes in sharp relief. The poetic persona in “Blackberry Time” must search for the berries she seeks, picking through obstacles and natural landscape to locate the hot sweetness she desires. And yet, these berries are in abundance as they in fact, “grow wild & lush everywhere,” ripe for the plucking and spreading. “Brown feet” walk barefoot over hot, over-ripened blackberries, mirroring her “mouthstained” purple-black smile. Each tactile, sumptuous-laden physical experience is commemorated in this poem, where black/berries are not only wild, but also free.

Notably, in these poems, sex, food, and eating aren’t conflated concepts or acts. Each is represented in its composite dimensions, yet connected through angry, playful, or suggestive connotations. This connective tissue of affectively various associations obtains in prose centered on the jointures of sexuality and food, too. Allison’s delightful

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<sup>56</sup> Doris Davenport, *Voodoo Chile: A Slight Return: Poems* (Charlotte, NC: Soque Street Press, 1991) 17.

short story, “A Lesbian Appetite,” perhaps engages with these intersextonalities more explicitly than any other text, as she interweaves lines describing poverty with lines contemplating food meanings, all the while paying homage to southern appetites and lesbian sexuality. Southern identity and food thematics take precedence early on in the story, and are crucial to understanding her penurious, white trash childhood. As a young girl, Allison worries that she and her cousins aren’t getting enough Vitamin D; a teacher offhandedly remarks that “the children of the poor have a lack of brain tissue simply because they don’t get the necessary vitamins at the right age.”<sup>57</sup> Her poor diet seems inextricably linked to her poor upbringing, as she blends class and diet in ways that limit, control, and shame her. She attributes her dietary habits, yearnings for southern foods that nourish both her body and soul, to a catalogue of physical ailments including rotten teeth, bad skin, and rickets. These hypervisible physical markers seem to brand her with a poverty that she can neither fully escape nor fully forget.

The salience of southern food memory is articulated through her personal sexual history—as she loves women, so too does she love eating—both are sources of pleasure and comfort. Whether achieved through food or sex, both of her drives for pleasure and comfort flirt with the realities of indulging:

“Swallow it,” Jay said.

Her hand worked between us, pinching me but forcing the thick cream out of my cunt. She brought it up and pushed it into my mouth, took the hand I’d cleaned and smeared it again with her own musky gravy.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Allison, *Trash* 156.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

Sex for Allison is messy. It is textured, smelly, sweaty, and consuming. It is not mannerly or refined, but instead, it is thick and hearty, gravy and cream.

Allison's evocative eroticism mirrors her gastronomic desire for "southern beans, pork fat, buttermilk, barbeque, and hush puppies" as affective resonances stem from a pleasure in remembering: "I've only had one lover who didn't want to eat at all. We didn't last long. The sex was good, but I couldn't think what to do with her when the sex finished. We drank spring water together and fought a lot."<sup>59</sup> Food is seamlessly linked to sexuality in this story, and the space of the kitchen and home itself—the South—is inscribed with a reconceptualized, distinctively lesbian domesticity. Challenging implicit heteronormative narratives of cooking and kinship in the region, including her own family's kitchen back in South Carolina, presided over by her Mama, Allison queers the home, and by extension, the region and nation through the impact of lesbian hypervisibility. Indeed, Allison dreams of throwing a dinner party at the end of the story, where she invites all of the women from her life—lesbian lovers and girlfriends—to enter the space of her mother's house and partake in the feast: "My mama is in the kitchen salting a vat of greens. Two of my aunts are arguing over whether to make little baking powder biscuits or big buttermilk logsheads."<sup>60</sup> Suddenly, Allison, a woman whose childhood was characterized by hunger, no longer hungers. In the moment that her lovers enter her home—the space where southern food is prepared and the regional place in which she was raised—Allison finds a unifying fullness.

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

Allison's relief is apparent on the surface, too, after such a long separation from home (the South) and the food she is unable and unwilling to disassociate from it. Living in New York City, Allison nostalgically reflects on the fried, crisp, buttered, slathered, and marinated food of her youth—and the comforting feeling of home it evokes. One girlfriend from the North, Lee, is a health food nut. In preparing the food for the great Southeastern Feminist Conference, Lee tries to convince Allison that healthy, vegetarian food is the way to go.<sup>61</sup> She plies Allison with “poppyseed cake made with gluten flour,” seven-grain bread, whole wheat pasta, granola, salad, and fruits—eventually enlisting Allison to peel, slice, and chop loads and loads of fresh vegetables, including “carrots, potatoes, onions, green and red peppers, leeks, tomatoes, and squash.”<sup>62</sup> Allison believes that the two hundred southern women would rather have “donuts and coffee.”<sup>63</sup>

At play in this story are multiple, traditionally diachronically opposed binaries: the North/South divide, healthy/junk food, and a highbrow/lowbrow class-based hierarchy of food preferences. But these binaries go beyond southern regional identity, food, and class to engage with sex and nation: for Allison, what is considered “bad” junk food is actually good and tasty, no matter how it intersects with her body and health. Similarly, what is considered “bad sex” or anti-feminist sex in the nationally waged Lesbian Sex Wars of the 1980s—in particular, S/M kink—is actually good, and preferable to Allison.

Interestingly, nostalgia reverberates throughout this passage, too, as food is associated with comfort, comforting food is associated with southern food, and southern

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 158.

food is associated with home. For Allison, the relationship between what food is comforting, and good, directly parallels with what sex is comforting, and good. Even in moments where food is not obviously linked to southernness or region, Allison is able to transform the alimentary experience into a comforting and good sexual encounter, thus indirectly joining narratives of home by way of non-normative, messy, subversive lesbian sex:

I took the wedge of eggplant and rubbed it on the back of her neck. “What are you doing?”

“Salting the eggplant.” I followed the eggplant with my tongue, pulled up her T-shirt, and slowly ran the tough purple rind up to her small bare breasts. Lee started giggling, wiggling her ass, but not taking her hands out of the flour to stop me. I pulled down her shorts, picked up another dry slice and planted it against her navel, pressed with my fingers and slipped it down toward her pubic mound.

“You are just running salt, girl,” I teased, and pushed slices up between her legs, while I licked one of her nipples and pinched the other between a folded slice of eggplant. She was laughing, her belly bouncing under me.

“I’m going to make you eat all this,” she yelled.<sup>64</sup>

If we understand the home to be a micro-level representation of the nation, then both the home and nation are overwhelmingly fashioned within dominant ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality and normative sexual desires. Allison’s short story “A Lesbian Appetite” subverts these dualistic frames, illustrating how lesbian hypervisibility works to accommodate other forms of sexuality and enable new conceptions of national subjects through the regional. The South functions as tenor concept; southern food is the vehicle for progressive social change, or at least, room for more non-normativity at a national table. This story utilizes the most commonplace, messy, and low quality southern foods (red beans and rice, chicken necks and dumplings, pan-fried pork chops

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 155.

and red-eye gravy, barbeque and coleslaw) to translate large scale, complex metaphors surrounding home, nostalgia, comfort, nation, and sexual (non) normativity—ultimately foregrounding importance of what we get from critically thinking about sex through food, and putting a taste of the South in our mouths.

And to what end? Intersexuality in these works enables Allison, Pratt, and Davenport to transform the obvious, making lesbian eroticism and desire hypervisible through the vehicle of southern food. This gesture asserts lesbian sexual identity as a politically viable subject position in the region, making their voices and writings important and valuable to an increasingly polarized national feminist centrally concerned with the meanings and implications of sex acts. Southern lesbian writers were at the center of those debates, making surface more than their sexuality on the textual page, as their autochthonous regional roots were hypervisible as well.

Moving from marginalization to unification, these women celebrated their lesbianism through love of food and love of region, creating a sense of unity and sociality over the most mundane and routine of southern foods: tomatoes, peaches, blackberries, and biscuits. The ordinary, commonplace quality of these foods, and their effortless availability in the region, suggests something powerful and profound: that lesbians and their literary productions were, and still are, extant, plenteous, and thriving in the South.

## CHAPTER FOUR COMING OUT AND TUTOR TEXT PERFORMANCE IN JANE CHAMBERS' LESBI-DRAMAS

Politics is theater. It doesn't matter if you win. You make a statement. You say, 'I'm here, pay attention to me.'<sup>1</sup>

It is perfectly meaningless to 'come out' as a heterosexual.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing my explorations of lesbian hypervisibility, or the blatant, surface representation of explicit lesbian topics and themes in southern literary productions, I turn to Jane Chambers' considerable contributions to lesbian theatre history as exemplified by lesbi-dramas *A Late Snow* (1974), *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (1980), and *My Blue Heaven* (1981). Modeling a combination of the surface and close reading techniques established in chapter one, I assert that Jane Chambers' plays function as especially explicit tutor texts, because instances of lesbian hypervisibility in these works, are, in fact, performed.<sup>3</sup> As such, the plays concretize visually and aurally what the text of the script conveys, and in so doing, they require the audience to process and understand codes and meanings at a moment's notice—while, perhaps, calling into question the theatregoer's own institutionally determined set of beliefs or values.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Milk (Sean Penn) to Scott Smith (James Franco) in Gus Van Sant's film *MILK* (2008)

<sup>2</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005) 52.

<sup>3</sup> See Martina Ladendorf's "Commercialization of Lesbian Identities in Showtime's *L Word*" in *Culture Unbound* No. 2 (2010) for a discussion of teaching moments; this article posits the television series as a learning text for heterosexual audience who wonders what lesbians do and how lesbian desire and lesbian sexual possibilities are constructed and embodied.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Davy, "Constructing the Spectator: Reception, Context, and Address in Lesbian Performance," *Performing Arts Journal* 10.2 (1986): 44.



Through the performance of these plays a sort of visual imaginary is communicated to the audience: discourses within the scripts advocate for lesbian social justice at the national level, intersecting with social politics and public identification.<sup>5</sup> Surface representations of positive lesbian relationships—friends and lovers—combine to produce a critical, and above all, visible message to audiences and readers alike: unabashed and discernible demands for equality, tolerance, and solidarity. There are infinite possibilities for performance and reperformance in these works, which in turn, nightly set the stage for progressive political claims.

Because the lesbian content of these plays is so hypervisible, so on the surface, and indeed, so “readable,” the degree to which a theatregoer must interpret meaning and message is significantly reduced, although the speed at which this process happens is increased. Likewise, operating as tutor texts, these teaching moments no doubt extended textually to circulate amongst hostile and/or sympathetic readers, although in this chapter, I assert the significance of performing lesbian hypervisibility. These plays enlighten spectators by increasing their awareness of key issues at the forefront of the lesbian-feminist movement: coming out politics, marriage rights, and workplace equality. Similarly, and at a basic level, these plays taught theatregoers—whether gay, straight, lesbian, queer, allies, supporters, or homophobes—the role of sexual identity in creating and shaping one’s personal subjectivity even as they actively illustrated that there’s more than one way to be (act, perform) a lesbian. Indeed, the characters in these works are not exemplary in any way. There is no sense of particular exceptionalism, deification,

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<sup>5</sup> It may be worth briefly mentioning how these plays express their politics. They are not overwhelmingly didactic in, say, the manner of political plays of the 1930s or jarringly experimental, as with modern and postmodern drama. Instead, the dramatic form and style of these plays are realistic: they incorporate social critique and social commentary.

separatism, or natural superiority. Chambers' women are ordinary in their quests for success and love, passion and commitment—and everyday in their commonplace woes and worries. What is extraordinary, however, is the unapologetic and hypervisible portrayal of lesbians, lesbian-feminist politics, and most importantly, the repeated, performed representation—assertion—of lesbians as social beings and political subjects during a remarkably charged period of activism for the larger feminist movement.

In dialogue with one another, Chambers' plays evidence hypervisible and robust engagements with lesbian sexuality, sociality, and political intersectionalities—these vibrant works are significant, even central, to the burgeoning national story of feminist politics and creation of a lesbian historiography. Textually, *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven* fit squarely within the temporal scope of lesbian literary productions I examine. But as dramatic performances, they would have generated palpable energy—a real force, a radical force—a liminal space where the politics of being and coming “out” was both a performed and performative gesture. Chambers' writing, and the performance of her works, all but beg the reader and audience to come out—to come out as allies, to come out as lesbians, to come out as activists, and to come out as feminists—placing her work at the center of the late 1970s era gay and lesbian movement in terms of self-disclosing one's sexual identity in a public fashion for the purposes of achieving social justice. At the heart of Chambers' plays is a drive toward imagining a new normativity into existence: a different worldview, where lesbians who had entered into heterosexual marriages at one time could keep custody of their children (Rae and Annie in *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*), where being out as lesbian at a university wasn't a risk to one's career (Ellie in *A Late Snow*), and where two women could legally

get married (Molly and Josie in *My Blue Heaven*). Chambers creates a world of love between women, where “love IS neurotic,” where love “makes the world go round, resolves all problems, conquers all,” a place where love is related to hope in some wonderful and obscure way that is as yet undetermined, but which inspires change (*Last Summer 73*, *My Blue Heaven* 83).

### **Thinking Lesbian Theatre and Performativity**

According to Gary Richards in a recent Modern Language Association conference presentation, “Excepting Faulkner, no literary figure is as central to southern sexuality studies as Tennessee Williams,” as Williams’s array of literary productions exhibit a same-sex focus in addition to an array of other sexual practices and performances including masturbation, interracial and intergenerational sex, prostitution, and promiscuity.<sup>6</sup> Canonical framing aside, and beyond the scope of mid-century literary productions, contemporary playwrights negotiating sexualities and working within (global) southern contexts include Jim Grimsley, the much-publicized Tony Kushner, Cuban-American 2003 Pulitzer Prize winner Nilo Cruz, and Alfred Uhry (often recognized for his 1987 off-Broadway play *Driving Miss Daisy*, later recipient of the 1989 Academy Award for Best Writing Adapted Screenplay). The large-scale success of *Driving Miss Daisy* as a film adaptation, for example, would have shaped and framed understandings of the region in the mainstream, however stereotypical and racially fraught they were.

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<sup>6</sup> “The South and Sexuality” panel, Southern Literature Discussion Group Forum at The 128<sup>th</sup> Modern Language Association conference, Boston, MA January 8-11, 2013.

Within a landscape of southern writers producing works of drama, it is particularly striking that scholarship on post-midcentury southern female playwrights depicting non-normative sexualities still has some catching up work to do.<sup>7</sup> Although Lillian Hellman emerged as a leading female playwright before 1969, few other mid-century southern female dramatists directly engaged with sexuality in their works. As Bibler demonstrates in “A Queer Sense of Justice in Lillian Hellman’s Dramas of the Hubbard Family,” the possibility for southern women imagining lesbian sexuality (on the southern plantation), even ambiguously and veiled, was relatively slim—although “covert lesbian relationships might go unrecognized and unchallenged” so long as systems of patriarchal dominance remained in place.<sup>8</sup> The plantation’s power structure, presided over by masculine privilege, would not have allowed for hypervisible, openly acknowledged or recognized homo-relations between women. In spite of this, as Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934), *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), and Carson McCuller’s *The Member of the Wedding* demonstrate, female same-sex desire, eroticism, and sociality existed, however esoteric.

While it is not my intention to provide a sweeping chronicle of lesbian theatre in America or lesbian-themed drama in southern literature, I do seek to explore trends in these plays that parallel and engage with major changes in American culture at the time they were written and produced on stage, as twentieth-century gay and lesbian life increasingly marked the interest of plays, playwrights, and performers. So too do I seek

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<sup>7</sup> For female playwrights beyond the (temporal) scope of this chapter who centralize lesbianism in their works set within southern contexts, see Carolyn Gage’s oeuvre, and Sharon Bridgforth’s play *the bull jean stories* (1998) set in the 1920s rural south.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bibler, *Cotton’s Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation 1936-1968* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009) 123.

to acknowledge the importance of lesbian playwrights occupying a double minority position in terms of sex and sexuality—complicated further by southern regional identities and contexts within their works. I am interested here in de-valorizing the norm not only in terms of which forms of writing queer studies and southern sexuality studies scholars have canonically privileged (the novel) and largely discounted (drama). Equally troubling, and from another critical perspective, theatre and performance studies have been “notoriously uninterested in regional identity” (Richards). In “Southern Drama.” Gary Richards writes, “the U.S. South has rarely been scripted as central to the national’s history of writing, producing, and attending drama,” suggesting that the South’s relationship to drama has long been a vexed one.<sup>9</sup>

Although we might be hard pressed to situate Chambers’ plays within more overt representations of southernness, they do contain subtle connections to the region when contextualized within the histories of southern literature and drama. Chambers’ plays are examples of what I call non-southern southern writings, or more precisely, that these works lean toward nuance and intricacy when representing southernness. Chambers avoids both urban settings and overtly southern ones in an effort to foreground her tutor text messages through lesbian hypervisibility—moving her characters into southern locations would, in effect, shift the focus from lesbian issues of political importance to overwhelmingly regional ones. We gain a greater understanding of her non-southern southern writing, that is, her strategic inclusion of southern (literature) allusions, when considering it within the framework of more explicitly, self-consciously southern

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<sup>9</sup> Gary Richards, “Southern Drama,” *The Cambridge Companion to The Literature of the American South*, Sharon Monteith, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 174.

writings that I explore in chapters one, two, and three and, most importantly, alongside other works of lesbian drama in southern literature. Reading the surface allusions to southern drama and the southern region present in her plays allows us to imagine these works operating in and accessing the South across a temporal divide. Lesbian schoolteachers in *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven* are reminiscent of Karen and Martha in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, for example. As I will demonstrate, these instances of energetic intertextuality between and across texts elicit an odd sense of *déjà* or *presque vu*, or a sense of details already or almost seen, as precise representations of space and place, settings, vocations, and small textual references within the plays align Chambers' plays with other key works of southern lesbian drama, in effect producing a non-southern southern context.<sup>10</sup> Chambers' *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven* are crucial but understudied lesbian literary productions of the period that evidence a sizeable awareness of the national feminist movement, and concretize the formidable, vitalizing role that southern lesbians had in it. They should also be read as works of southern literature within a schematic of recognition through absence, or what I term a conspicuously non-southern southernness.

According to *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People*, Chambers was born in Columbia, South Carolina, and grew up in Florida,

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<sup>10</sup> Terry Castle calls this sensation "a feeling of outright 'possession' by the ghosts of the lesbian literary past" in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 62.

although as a writer, she is “not usually associated with the South.”<sup>11</sup> After attending Rollins for a year, Chambers studied acting at the Pasadena Playhouse before becoming a full time writer. Chambers’ literary oeuvre is spacious. Her output is a product of her myriad job experiences: she worked as a staff writer for a television station in Maine from 1964-1966, as a literary agent, television soap opera writer, theatre critic in New York City, and before she began writing plays, she acted in them. “I got out of college and tried to participate in the coffee house theatre Off Off-Broadway,” Chambers recalls, “but at that time it was even harder than today for a woman to get anything done. Primarily I worked as an actress and I also wrote.”<sup>12</sup> Chambers wrote over twenty novels under various undisclosed pseudonyms and at the age of forty-six—the height of her career as a lesbian-feminist playwright—she died of brain cancer.

Before her death, her twelve written plays garnered considerable national attention, awards, and grants, performing lesbian theatre Off Broadway and “even in regional theatres.”<sup>13</sup> Vexingly, it is extremely difficult to establish if Chambers’ plays had been performed at all in the South, and if so, what their reception might have been in a region that many would have presupposed to have been behind the times in lesbian-feminist literary production—although my argument throughout this project has demonstrated that region is a key context in the works of lesbian-feminist writers and

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, Todd W. Taylor, eds. *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) 429.

<sup>12</sup> Holly Hill, “How Do Playwrights Make a Living?” *Theatre Journal* 33.4 (1981): 520.

<sup>13</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 596.

their southern sapphisms. Within this particular chapter, however, southernness is not emphasized to the degree that lesbian hypervisibility is, although small, deft references within the plays evidence anxieties surrounding the urban/rural divide, strategically allude to other histories of southern literature and drama, and subtly connect to the region. As one example, consider how Chambers' *A Late Snow* strands lesbian characters in a snowbound cabin; this deliberate use of snow-as-fate and "out there"-ness is reminiscent of Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), where Frankie is obsessed with snow and the new life it represents for her. "One of the most intriguing features of modern lesbian-themed literature," according to Terry Castle, is "its tendency to hark back, by way of embedded intertextual references, to earlier works on the same subject."

The settings Chambers embraces in these plays pointedly set their characters apart from city life—immersing them in women-populated spaces where lesbian sociality fuels the realistic, domestic-comedy dramas. Castle identifies two mimetic contexts in which realistic works of lesbian literature have presented flourishing lesbian plots and characters: the world of adolescence (recall, for example, my discussions from chapter one detailing Mariah's early girl-girl explorations in Shay Youngblood's *Soul Kiss*), or "the world of divorce, widowhood, and separation."<sup>14</sup> Castle, of course, seeks to develop a contextual environment that surrounds post-marital relations, but I wonder if separation, when conceived as network of spaces mediated through the politics of place, might encompass locales and settings that are exclusive, remote, secluded, isolated, and out of the way. Chambers' *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven*

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<sup>14</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* 85.



eschew city-based metro-narratives of lesbian life as they instead favor intimate spaces where women gather to support one another and build lasting friendships and community: an old cabin by a lake, where five women become trapped together during a snowstorm, an island cove that had been “a gay women’s haven for thirty years or more,” and finally, a dilapidated farmhouse located someplace in upstate New York.<sup>15</sup> Chambers avoids both urban settings and overtly southern ones in an effort to foreground her tutor text messages—moving her characters into southern locations would actually distract from the hypervisibility of lesbianism because it would inadvertently shift the focus from lesbian sexual issues to regional ones. In a way, these settings are conspicuously non-southern, and are, in effect, hypovisible examples of southern literature even as they contain hypervisible representations of lesbian sexuality and sociality.

Chambers got her break in the early 1970s when her civil rights play *Christ in a Treehouse* “was broadcast on Connecticut Educational Television” in 1971.<sup>16</sup> Each following year saw some success: her plays *Random Violence* (1973), *Mine!* (1974), and *The Wife* (1973) were produced and first presented at the Women Interarts Theater in New York City, of which Chambers was a founding member, alongside Margot Lewitin.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Chambers wrote for a general audience, and with the exception of her plays *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven*, she did not usually incorporate lesbian characters or themes, although her two-character

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Chambers, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (The JH Press Gay Play Script Series, New York: JH Press, first printing, July 1982) 49.

<sup>16</sup> George E. Haggerty, John Beynon, and Douglas Eisner, eds. *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, Vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2000) 156.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

one-act play *Quintessential Image* (1982) does to some degree.<sup>18</sup> Of course, this does not compromise the emotional truth of these works or diminish the universal applicability of their themes—justice, equality, rights, and the right to love—indeed, it suggests that Chambers was keenly aware of the highly charged temporal moment in which she was writing and producing. And, those three plays were plenty enough to mark her contribution to lesbian theater as “monumental, far beyond that which other lesbian playwrights had previously achieved.”<sup>19</sup>

In a New York Times review from 1981 titled “PLAY’S THEME: LESBIANS WITH OUT APOLOGY,” Jane Chambers is heralded as an iconic contributor to contemporary lesbian theatre, distinctive in feminist voice and mission: “JANE CHAMBERS is a playwright who speaks for the cause of women in general and lesbians in particular. Ask her which has been the greater obstacle in her life: her gender or her sexuality, and she answers: 'That's easy—judgments are based on seeing; one of the things about being gay that doesn't get in the way is that, most of the time, you can't see it, but being a woman is something you have to deal with every minute.’”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chambers’ response is heavily laden with a feminist consciousness-raising rhetoric characteristic of the 1970s era Women’s Liberation Movement, and it reveals the centrality of identity politics and personal narrative. She represents these ideals textually in the tensions between lesbian-feminist unity, community, and

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<sup>18</sup> Chambers’ *Quintessential Image* written in 1982 “was published posthumously in a double bill with *In Her Own Words*, a biographical portrait compiled from her writings” in 1989 (Haggerty 156).

<sup>19</sup> Flora, *The Companion* 149.

<sup>20</sup> Alvin Klein, “Play’s Theme: Lesbians With Out Apology,” *The New York Times* (February 08, 1981).

individuality. And while her comment fits squarely within this socio-historical moment from whence the plays I examine in this chapter emerged, postmodern and poststructural feminist infused thought of the next decade would be disconcerted at the prospect of such untroubled gender politics—her response would seem conservative and essentialist—as interrogations of gender had not quite happened yet within academic scholarship.

Chambers' three lesbian-centric plays, however, were a direct response to late 1970s and early 1980s feminisms—particularly in terms of conceiving the politics of coming out as not only descriptive, but also deeply constitutive. As a performative utterance within the field of speech-act theory, coming out is constitutive even though it is made to sound descriptive due to its communicative nature.<sup>21</sup> With regard to lesbian representation, each pioneered positive self-images of lesbians while resisting and dispelling traditional negative stereotypes of lesbians as pathologically ill or the denial of lesbian presence altogether.<sup>22</sup> Her works resist narratives of lesbian fiction where bonds between women are broken up by heteronormative systems and structures, or where lesbians die, get married, or reconcile themselves with celibacy, asexuality, or return to the erotic world of men.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For more on performative utterances, see J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). For gender and speech act theory, see Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> See Ann Fleche's essay "The Lesbian Rule: Lillian Hellman and the Measures of Realism" in *Modern Drama* 39.1 (1996) for a discussion of southern lesbian drama where lesbian characters are ignored, portrayed negatively, or ambiguously represented.

<sup>23</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* 85. For more on celibacy in canonical works of American literature, see Benjamin Kahan's treatment of Henry James' *The Bostonians* in *Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

In "Some Notes on Lesbian Theatre," Emily L. Sisley details a list of nine working definitions worth quoting in its entirety; lesbian theatre might operationally be conceived of as:

- Lesbian theatre is about lesbians—i.e. content is structured around a theme that deals with the experiences, thoughts and/or "lifestyles" of lesbians.
- Lesbian theatre is by lesbians—i.e. plays written by lesbians are lesbian plays regardless of theme.
- Lesbian theatre is played by lesbians—i.e. plays are lesbian when they feature gay women, whether out or closeted (like so many of the "greats" everyone knows about but no one talks about).
- Lesbian theatre is feminist theatre—i.e. because of its focus on woman/woman relationships, all feminist theatre is essentially lesbian theatre.
- Lesbian theatre is distinct from feminist theatre—i.e. lesbian plays concentrate on lesbian relationships rather than woman/woman relationships in general.
- Lesbian theatre is part of, but not the same as, feminist theatre—i.e. the shared focus differs from the sharp distinctions between "gay (male) theatre" and "straight (male) theatre."
- Lesbian theatre is consciousness-raising in performance—i.e., the lesbian audience requires theatre specifically dedicated to clarifying points concerning oppression, the validity of woman-to-woman relationships, and heroism divorced from male identity.
- Lesbian theatre is part of gay theatre—i.e. themes concerning homosexual relationships may apply to either gender and/or to shared elements of homo-aesthetics or homoeroticism.
- There is no such thing as lesbian theatre—i.e., theatre is theatre, whether gay or straight.<sup>24</sup>

Of these, I arrive at the same conclusion she does: that there is some element of truth to each, while no individual statement fully encompasses the breadth and span of their combined force. For my purposes in considering *A Late Snow* and *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, however, it bears mentioning that portions of each statement above are dynamically gestured to on the textual surface, where the realist content of the play is

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<sup>24</sup> Emily L. Sisley, "Notes on Lesbian Theatre," *The Drama Review: Sex and Performance* Issue 25. 1 (1981): 47.

centered around the lesbian lifestyle, portrayed by lesbian characters, and written by a lesbian.

Jane Chambers' own stance on the classifying and categorizing of lesbian plays is important, especially when taking into account tutor text messages translated through lesbian hypervisibility in her works: "The world calls them that, and producers call them that. As far as I'm concerned, they are *plays*."<sup>25</sup> As for labeling her own body of work, which includes a novel and a collection of poems, Chambers remarks, "I'm not a one subject playwright—and there is no reason to believe I will be categorized—at least I hope not."<sup>26</sup> This chapter will endeavor to sidestep posthumously categorizing Chambers herself as a writer, while simultaneously establishing her plays as groundbreaking theatrical works representing love between women as non-pathological, and most important, representing relationships between lesbian as deeply invested in community-building and sociality.<sup>27</sup> Through her tutor text messages, we see Chambers' plays

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Klein, "Lesbians With Out Apology." Twenty-eight years after Chambers' death, during The 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Lambda Literary Award acceptance speech, Edward Albee (best known for his plays *A Zoo Story* (1958), *The Sandbox* (1959), and his 1962 produced/1963 Tony Award for Best Play winner, *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*) would echo her sentiment, saying, "A writer who happens to be gay or lesbian must be able to transcend self. I am not a gay writer. I am a writer who happens to be gay." In a NPR interview conducted with Rebecca Montagne in 2011, he remarked: "Maybe I'm being a little troublesome about this, but so many writers who are gay are expected to behave like gay writers and I find that is such a limitation and such a prejudicial thing that I fight against it whenever I can."

<sup>27</sup> In Klein's "Lesbians With Out Apology," Chambers comments on the troubling representations of lesbians and gays in twentieth-century American theatre history, quipping: "The Boys in the Band," the breakthrough play for male homosexuals, "was negative; the characters didn't like themselves," Miss Chambers declared. "Maybe 'Bluefish Cove'"—which has been referred to as "The Girls in the Sand"—"will open the

intersecting with Sisley's bulleted point: "dedicated to clarifying points concerning oppression" and "consciousness-raising in performance." Conceptualizing Chambers' lesbi-dramas within this framework is certainly supported by readings of her plays as explicit tutor text performances utilizing lesbian hypervisibility to argue for social and political progressiveness.

Lesbian theatre of the late 1970s and 1980s was invariably interconnected with and a product of concurrent U.S. feminisms and the gay and lesbian theatre movement in turn paralleled the women's liberation movement. As is to be expected, the bulk of lesbian theatre was produced in major metropolitan cities including New York City, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago, and San Francisco. In an effort to begin cataloging gay and lesbian as well as lesbian-feminist theatre groups and dedicated companies, the Gay Theatre Alliance was formed in 1978.<sup>28</sup> In a 1981 article written for *The Drama Review*, Terry Helbing, the co-founder of the Gay Theatre Alliance describes a list appearing in the Alliance's January 1981 newsletter comprised of "28 lesbian and gay theatre companies in 21 cities and in 5 countries."<sup>29</sup> It is unclear at this time how many of these companies might have toured in the South, for example, or how many southern cities might have appeared on the list—such detailed information is buried within an archive, notably Helbing's personal papers in New York at The Center. However, fascinatingly,

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door for lesbian characters," who have previously been depicted as bizarre ("The Killing of Sister George") or suicidal ("The Children's Hour") or simply nonexistent."

<sup>28</sup> For more information on the Gay Theatre Alliance, and the GTA list of gay and lesbian theatre companies, see Terry Helbing's papers at New York's Lesbian, Gay, Bi, and Transgender Community Center.

<sup>29</sup> "Gay Plays, Gay Theatre, Gay Performance." *The Drama Review* 25.1 (1981): 42.

The Center's online finding aids show four folders within the collection dedicated to Jane Chambers, in Box 2, folders 27-30—providing clear evidence that Chambers' work resonated within the highest echelons of the late 1970s and early 1980s premier gay and lesbian theatre organization.

Feminist theatre groups were formed and companies became established during that time, too, many of which not only ran lesbian themed plays and plays written by lesbians—works like Kate Kasten's *On The Elevator*, Holly Hughes' *Lady Dick* (1985), Cherríe Moraga's *teatro*, *Giving Up The Ghost* (1986), Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987), and Jane Wagner's Broadway hit *The Search For Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* starring her partner, Lily Tomlin. These and other plays productively fall somewhere on the spectrum of Sisley's working lesbian theatre lexicon.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, in "Notes on Lesbian Theatre," Sisley interviews the artistic director of The Cambridge Lesbian Theatre who, in 1980, mentions several lost and forgotten lesbian plays and shows performed between 1977-1978 in New Orleans, including such scintillating titles as *Dyke Drama Drag Show* and *Outlaw Music*.<sup>31</sup>

Other dedicated lesbian theatre companies producing plays that hypervisibly engaged with lesbian themes ranging from coming-out experiences to "boldly sexual work" including The Lavender Cellar in Minneapolis, Medusa's Revenge in New York,

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<sup>30</sup> See Phyllis Mael, Beverly Byers Pevitts, and Rosemary Curb's "Catalog of Feminist Theatre" in *Crysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture* No. 10 (April 1980) and *Feminist Theatre Groups*, surprisingly published in Jefferson, NC (McFarland & Co. 1980). For more contemporary sources on gay and lesbian theatre history, see James Fischer's *"We Will Be Citizens": New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre* (McFarland 2008) and various chapters in Alan Sinfield's *Out On Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (1999).

<sup>31</sup> Sisley, "Some Notes on Lesbian Theatre" 55.

the Front Room Theatre Guild in Seattle, and the Red Dyke Theatre in Atlanta, GA which sought to “entertain lesbians and celebrate their sexuality, *not* to educate straight people about lesbian and gay issues.”<sup>32</sup> Through archival research and critic’s responses to her works, I can ascertain that Jane Chambers’ *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, her most successful and frequently performed lesbian play, was produced by feminist theatre groups who were “lesbian in orientation” in at least one major southern city: Atlanta’s Red Dyke Theatre.<sup>33</sup>

Some companies took as their unique mission to educate heterosexual audiences by scattering stereotypical lesbian myths. While Chambers did not consider her own work as geared centrally toward that purpose, she acknowledged that the personal testimonies and audience reception played a key role in the plays’ cultural importance: “Gay people tell me they feel better about themselves, and straight people can suddenly understand a son or a daughter who is gay. I didn't mean for the play to do that, but I'm

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Out On Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) 309.

<sup>33</sup> The Red Dyke Theatre (RDT) was established in 1974 by a group of Atlanta lesbians who self-described as “sharing an interest in theatre, dancing and boogying, lesbian/feminist politics, and huge egos!” and who had eventually grown tired of “male-identified theatre” (Chenault, *Gay and Lesbian Atlanta* 67). According to Fran Pici, one of the co-founders, “The members of RDT were very involved in both the gay and lesbian and women’s communities” (Chenault, *Gay and Lesbian Atlanta* 67). For more on the Red Dyke Theatre from a southern sexuality studies perspective, see chapter seventeen in James T. Sears’ *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (2001), where he mentions the RDT as an aside, “the weekend events included a standing-only-room performance by the Red Dyke Theatre Group” (185). Finally, it bears mentioning that The Red Dyke Theatre appeared within one of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s vignettes in *S/he* (1997) titled “Steam Heat” (see chapter one for a lengthier discussion).



thrilled that it's helping people.”<sup>34</sup> And so while lesbians are overwhelmingly disadvantaged in terms of negative representations, silencing and exclusions, and the pressures of conformativity, experiencing Chambers’ *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven*, with the grain yields a celebratory valuing of lesbians both on stage and off stage—producing both lesbian sociality through nightly runs of these productions as well as expansive, affectively-charged benefits for receptive heterosexual audiences open to lesbian awareness, visibility, and social and political acceptance.<sup>35</sup>

Speaking lesbian, particularly naming oneself as a lesbian and identifying one’s work and/or theatre company as specifically lesbian, during the 1970s and 1980s was in itself a profoundly revolutionary and semantically revelatory act because it equated to public visibility. Public, explicit naming was a deeply empowering act as it signaled a massive shift out of silence and open secret cultural practices characteristic of mid-century southern authors to a politics of consciousness, recognition, and acknowledgement through language. Within the realm of lesbian theatre, speaking and performing personal testimony and narration contains the power to transform spectators, as naming oneself “burn(s) at the heart of lesbian feminism.”<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of her authorial intentions for the consumption of her plays or the modes through which those roles and scripts were represented across varying venues and

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<sup>34</sup> Klein, “Lesbians Without Apology.”

<sup>36</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives,” *Signs: The Lesbian Issue* 9. 4 (1984): 672. For examples of lesbian silencing and exclusions in modern lesbian writing see Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

actresses, *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven* altered a standard of vision for audiences by asserting the right to personal fulfillment—presenting lesbian hypervisibility and key issues important to the national feminist movement (solidarity and sociality) and the gay and rights movement (coming out, in particular) in an empowering way—even as these works framed what was possible to be seen and to be at the time.

### **We Are All Seeing Things: Tutor Texts and Politics of Visibility**

Chambers' *A Late Snow*, billed as “an important play that should be seen by everyone, straight, gay or on the fringe,” brings together a small group of women who each grapple with their own personal relationship to their sexual identities—exhibiting strength and fear, embarrassment and bravery, dissimilar degrees of out-ness and public sexuality identification—even as they struggle to negotiate their complex interpersonal relationships to each other (Drama-Logue). *A Late Snow* was a lesbian romantic comedy about, in Chambers' own words in the back matter of the 1970 JH Press Gay Play Script Series edition, “five women snow-bound in an isolated mountain cabin: Ellie and her first, last, current and next lover.” The two-act play first debuted in 1974 at the Clark Center for the Performing Arts in NYC, produced by Playwrights Horizons and directed by Nyla Lyon (see Figure 4.1 below).<sup>37</sup> The cast included Susanne Wasson playing Ellie, an esteemed college professor; Carolyn Cope (later replaced by Lin Shaye) as Quincey, a sincere college student and Ellen's current lover; Susan Sullivan as sassy, alcoholic Pat,

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<sup>37</sup> According to their website, the Clark Center was created in 1959 by Alvin Ailey. It housed a multi-racial and multi-ethnic arts community for three decades before closing in 1989 due to considerable financial struggles.

Ellie's last lover; Anita Keal playing Margo, a novelist and Ellie's future lover; and Marilyn Hamlin playing the unattainable Peggy, Ellie's first lover. *A Late Snow* utilizes a traditional romantic-comedic formula, which would have appealed to audiences: surprise characters appearing late in Act One, for example, confrontations and confessions, a prism of love triangles, and witty satire. It is a story about romantic love: what love is good for us, what love we must move on from, and how we determine what we need and want from love and in our relationships. Ellie, the central character of the play, struggles to examine her relationships, past, present, and future, when a freak, late season snowstorm brings her lovers together one thrilling evening.

Although the play was destined for success, Chambers encountered great difficulties during the production stage,

beginning with auditions, when women refused to read for a lesbian role, and culminating when a cast member dropped out the day before the opening because her boyfriend convinced her she would not get any more commercials if she appeared onstage as a lesbian. Chambers later described the experience as a 'hideous nightmare,' which abruptly changed when the play was a hit and 'suddenly the cast and crew adored each other.' The Broadway option was dropped, however, after six months when no backers were interested in a play about lesbians.<sup>38</sup>

The limitations in producing a play representing lesbian hypervisibility were unmistakable, but the radical import of such an endeavor—even in New York at the time—should not be undervalued. As conventional representations of women on stage altered and shifted with the rising tide of cultural mores, images of difference performed aurally and visually focus attention on the lesbian, shifting representation from marginal subject to a political being with agency.

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Peterson and Suzanne Bennet, eds. *Women Playwrights of Diversity: A Bibliographical Sourcebook* (Atlanta: Greenwood, 1997) 73.

In the middle of Act One of *A Late Snow*, Ellie, the professor, and Quincey, her student and current lover, grapple with their disparate views on coming out to their university, and indeed, on speaking and claiming a public lesbian identity. Ellie and Quincey evidence a pointed link to Karen and Martha in Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, providing another means by which to read the play as operating within broader discourses and histories of southern lesbian drama.



Figure 4. 1 A handbill from the original 1974 production of *A Late Snow*, produced by Playwrights Horizons, at the NYC Clark Center.

In *The Children's Hour*, (allegedly) lesbian headmistresses Karen and Martha are overheard squabbling by a young girl. This girl circulates a rumor that she saw the two women kissing, and the reputations of the headmistresses are permanently destroyed

through the public media and a messy trial. At the end of the play, Martha confesses that she did have strong feelings for Karen, although the sentiment is not reciprocated. The play ends with lesbian death as Martha commits suicide. Several resonances between *The Children's Hour* and *A Late Snow* operate on the surface, and indeed, surface reading methods encourage analysis that incorporates readings across texts. While no one dies in Chambers' play, the threat of lesbian sexuality and desire becoming public, Ellie's inability to come out as a figurehead on campus, and Quincey's ultimate inability to win and maintain Ellie's love strongly alludes to Hellman's play. Reading *A Late Snow* within this framework situates it within a broader context of southern lesbian drama.

Both lovers are incredibly passionate in maintaining their points of view in this exchange—honest in their emotions with each other while perhaps not being entirely honest with themselves concerning their fast—crumbling relationship. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, a study on how the idea of public frames our understandings of modern politics, literary texts, and contemporary life, Michael Warner writes,

Being publicly known as homosexual is never the same as being publicly known as heterosexual; the latter always goes without saying and troubles nothing, whereas the former carries echoes of pathologized visibility. It is perfectly meaningless to “come out” as heterosexual. So it is not true, as common wisdom would have it, that homosexuals live private lives without a secure public identity. They have neither privacy nor publicness, in these normative senses of the terms. In the United States, the judiciary, along with the military and its supporters in Congress and the White House, has gone to great lengths to make sure that they will have neither. It is this deformation of public and private that identity politics—and the performative ritual known as coming out—tries to transform.<sup>39</sup>

The delicate issue of when (or if) to come out and to whom in a romantic relationship would have undoubtedly resonated with 1970s era audiences, even as it is still under

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005) 52-3.

negotiation today, as advancements in workplace non-discrimination policies continue to be a pressing concern for the movement. The personal exchange between Ellie and Quincey in *A Late Snow* evidenced more than a squabble between lovers—one scared to come out, the other desperate to challenge workplace inequities—it was a call for advocacy that engaged with issues at the forefront of the national level. It was not accidental that 1974, in fact, marked the heyday of both the Gay Liberation and Women’s Liberation Movements. It was not accidental that such energies on the page and on the stage engaged with real, political forces determining and shaping the professional and personal lives of gay men and lesbian women.

The scene below hypervisibly performs and intersects with what would have been an already very public social dialogue fueled by U.S. Supreme Court decisions centered on workplace discriminations and laws across the country that acutely targeted homosexual teachers:<sup>40</sup>

ELLIE: It makes people uncomfortable. They don’t understand.

QUINCEY: It’s time we made them understand.

ELLIE: Quincey, I know you’re right.

QUINCEY: Then, why won’t you do something about it? Aren’t you proud? Don’t you like yourself?

ELLIE: I like being a woman.

QUINCEY: A woman who loves other women.

ELLIE: Quincey, listen to me! When I was your age, “lesbian” was a dictionary word used only to frighten teen-age girls and parents. Mothers fainted, fathers became violent, landlords evicted you, and nobody would

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<sup>40</sup> See, as one example, the 1985 Supreme Court case *Board of Education v. National Gay Task Force*, which challenged a law that allowed schools to fire teachers for homosexual conduct. Also see Anita Bryant’s national 1977 “Save Our Children” crusade that began through a successful repeal of an ordinance in Dade County, Florida, which prevented discrimination based on sexual orientation. For Harvey Milk’s successful campaign against California Proposition 6 (aka The Briggs Initiative), which would have banned gays, lesbians, and allies from working in California’s public schools.

hire you. A lesbian was like a vampire: she looked in the mirror and there was no reflection.

QUINCEY: You're scared.

ELLIE: Of course I'm scared. I don't want to be different. I don't want people pointing fingers at me, misguided altruists feeling sorry for me.

QUINCEY: You're a VIP on campus. You could be a figurehead.

ELLIE: I don't have the courage to be a figurehead, Quincey. I'm sorry. *(She starts to leave.)*

QUINCEY: Ellie? I hope I didn't screw things up for you. I don't want to hurt you. I love you. I love you, love you, love you. *(Ellie holds her.)* It's just that I'm so fucking tired of living in a closet.<sup>41</sup>

At the foreground in this exchange are affective resonances stemming from fear and probable backlash. Ellie cannot imagine performing the action required to be a figurehead subject on campus, because she does not realize that she is already a political subject—an inactive, unintentional one. In “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” Teresa deLauretis writes,

the political concepts of oppression and agency developed in the struggles of social movements such as the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, and third world feminism, as well as an awareness of the importance of developing a theory of sexuality that takes into account the working of unconscious processes in the construction of female subjectivity.<sup>42</sup>

Ellie's agency, or lack thereof with regard to coming out publicly as a lesbian, hinges on the discourses surrounding concepts of public and private, publicness and visibility, pathologized sexuality and identity politics. While the play's central message as a tutor text works to actively open positive representations of lesbians into the public eye while educating them on issues relevant to lesbian-feminists and the national homophile movement, Ellie, as a character, is deeply enmeshed in the struggles of living in the

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<sup>41</sup> Chambers, *A Late Snow* 46.

<sup>42</sup> Teresa deLauretis, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation” *Theatre Journal* 40.2 (1998): 177.

closet, unable to fully negotiate the paradoxes and possibilities of coming out. In a way, the play presents a mirror to the audience members, inviting them to reflect on their own understandings of community, subjectivity, and visibility.

On the surface, we see too the intersection of not only same-sex desire and partnership between Quincey and Ellen, but also a non-normative relationship in terms of intergenerational difference. Ellie, the older professor doesn't want anyone to know about her sexuality, as she crosses an age-span where articulating one's lesbian identity shifted from not okay to something more normalized, if not a burgeoning new normal. Her position is entirely understandable—as a lesbian, she has been invisible to this point. Quincey, however, a plucky young student, sees the situation through a completely different perspective. She urges Ellie to engage with the politics of coming out, and begs her to reject the very invisibility that continues to influence and shape her sexual identity. Quincey wants to exit the closet; she yearns for people to know not only that she is a lesbian and that Ellie is a lesbian, but that they are together in a committed lesbian relationship. To Quincey, it is through this visibility that her sexuality—and her taboo intergenerational student/professor relationship—is affirmed, validated, and conveyed.

In “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” Teresa deLauretis explores work in theatre and performance theory with regard to relations of homosexual subjectivity and spectatorship—that is, who produces representations of lesbians, for whom, and to what end. She cites critical work by Elizabeth Ellsworth, who argues, “that the struggle over interpretation is a constitutive process for marginalized subjectivities, as well as an important form of resistance.”<sup>43</sup> With this struggle in mind, the dynamics of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 169.



seeing in the scene above are multifaceted: while Ellie finds great difficulty in understanding—or finding the courage to act upon that understanding—how coming out would indeed, challenge the invisibility under which she feels so burdened, Quincey locates that performative act as a deeply meaningful one that would enrich their individual subjectivities and the health and well-being of their relationship. To readers, and to the audience, this fraught exchange between Quincey and Ellie visually suggests the emotional labor and expenditure—just one product of living in the closet—that remains hidden, closeted, invisible, and unseen but gestured toward on stage. At stake in coming out, or not, in this case, is continued silence and affective upheaval. At stake in coming out would be, of course, a near constant repetitive performance, something very much viewed, seen, and witnessed. And yet what Ellie does not consider—something the reader and spectator might themselves not process, although it is open for insight in the script—is that the risks Ellie fears in coming out and speaking lesbian will remain whether she does or not. Housing discrimination, violence, and fear of unemployment or fear of termination would exist in the world beyond the playhouse regardless. This is certain. What is unclear is whether or not Quincey will stay despite Ellie’s inability and refusal. The play navigates and privileges different registers of the political (no job protections) and the personal (will they stay together?) through a delicate balance of humor and tension.

In a surprise twist mere sentences before the conclusion of Act One, a fifth woman arrives: Peggy, Ellie’s college sweetheart. Peggy adds to the tension in the cabin in a multitude of ways, as she is the only heterosexual-identified woman in the group—having just recently split from her husband, Jim, and is also Ellie’s first, idealized lover.

Peggy's character loves her female friends deeply, and might be more aligned with Adrienne Rich's inclusive definition of a lesbian as a woman who develops primarily emotional and bonding intensities with other women—affectionate relationships—not necessarily authenticated by sexual contact. Peggy refuses to acknowledge her past sexual relationship with Ellie. Her interloping presence into the lesbian-knit space of the cabin manifests as a performative disruption: her denial and disavowal are palpable, maddening, and ultimately, revealing, as coming out anxieties continue to surface while the women are snowbound in a mountain cabin.

PEGGY: Wanda thinks I should leave him.

ELLIE: What do you think?

PEGGY: I think he's a son of a bitch. I've put most of my life into this marriage. The kids will be out of school in a few years. I don't know. I don't know what I want. I guess that's why I came here. You're the only person I know who'll understand. You and Wanda.

ELLIE: (*Meaningfully*) Wanda?

PEGGY: You sound like Jim! Wanda is my friend, like you were my friend. I love her, like I loved you.

ELLIE: We loved each other—a step beyond friendship.

PEGGY: We were friends. Best friends. I never felt so close to anyone, until Wanda.

ELLIE: What you're feeling isn't friendship, Peggy. What we felt together wasn't friendship.

PEGGY: Of course it was! We loved each other.

ELLIE: We were in love with each other.

PEGGY: It's not like that.

ELLIE: We made love.<sup>44</sup>

Reading with the grain, we see Peggy's affective relationship to shame as the glossing over of past homoerotic and homosexual feelings toward Ellie, and in the present, an unmaterialized Wanda. Ellie, in seeking to make visible the sexual component of their relationship, emphasizes the affective relations between past and present with regard to how Peggy's shame and refutation might be inhibiting her from examining the

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<sup>44</sup> Chambers, *A Late Snow* 60.

social politics of her everyday life. In particular, we see paradigms of visibility circulating here, where Ellie maintains the validity of their physical experiences as crucial to her personal identity, while Peggy continues to repudiate the degree of intimacy shared between them.

Lingering with Peggy's affective register in this scene, and the activist work of identity rhetorics performed (and in performance), we might consider how "rather than seeing negative feelings of failure, mourning, despair, and shame as getting in the way of politics or needing to be converted to something more active in order to become politics, such work attends to felt experience as not only already political but as transforming our understandings of what counts as political."<sup>45</sup> In many ways, being a lesbian and coming out as a lesbian are both ambiguous, ascribed, circumscribed, and highly contestable, repetitive acts. Peggy's refusal to claim a lesbian identity within a non-public, lesbian-embodied space is obliquely paralleled with Ellen's own refusal to claim her lesbian identity within the public space of the university—both women can neither fully embrace nor fully disentangle their difficulties in understanding coming out as itself a political act, whether amongst a community of friends and lovers or the public eye.

At the conclusion of *A Late Snow*, Ellie at last finds the kind of love she seeks with a jaded writer, Margo, who also yearns for a new life partner and a new lease on life. In pursuing her instant attraction to Margo, Ellie foregoes her skewed power dynamic and intergenerational relationship with Quincey, and the play neatly resolves with professor and writer starting afresh, ripe with hope, lessons learned, and shared determination. And yet, something very queer is going on with regard to temporality in this scene:

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<sup>45</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, And Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University, 2003) 110.

MARGO: A lot of people hold on to dead things. But to make something last—and live...It's harder with a woman. There are no rules. And the stakes are so very high. *(They look at each other for a moment.)* We worked at it. We worked very hard at it. We brought new things into our relationship, we challenged one another with ideas, with goals. We weren't always successful. We had bad years, years when I was sure it was over, when I thought it should be over. But we survived them, somehow. It was good again, it was working. *(Pause.)* I think I hated her for dying, for leaving me. And I was very frightened, I still am.

ELLIE: But you've learned to be alone.

MARGO: I don't do it very well. I need to share, to be a part of something.

ELLIE: But they don't last. It doesn't last. You start to build—and it's over. You start again—and it's over. Why bother?

MARGO: Because you need it. I need it. And we keep hoping, all of us: men and women, women and women, men and men, that we can make it work. What do you want Ellie?

ELLIE: Someone to grow old with. Someone to build with.

MARGO: You can do that with Quincey. What do you want, Ellie?

ELLIE: I want it all. I want to tremble. I want that kind of crazy desire that surmounts reason. I want someone to live for, to die with. Someone to climb mountains for, slay dragons for, someone to snuggle with by a fire when the world is cold. I want a lover consumed by the greatest passion, a partner possessed of the greatest loyalty, a friend committed to the greatest love. With Pat, there was passion. With Quincey, there was loyalty. I don't want to settle. I want it all. I thought I'd had it all with Peggy. Passion, loyalty, friendship. I thought it had been perfect. But it was so long ago and I was so young. I knew less then. Maybe I needed less, too.<sup>46</sup>

Off stage, the audience's relationship to lesbian hypervisibility enables them to consider alternative forms of being and moving in the world—sexually, politically, and from a social justice perspective. Considerations of temporality illuminate the tutor-text message conveyed through the performance to the audience. In “Constructing the Spectator,” Kate Davy elucidates, “perhaps performance by its very nature has more subversive potential than other venues precisely because the spectator is unable to stop and reread one of its moments. In this sense her perceptions are more easily manipulated

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<sup>46</sup> Chambers, *A Late Snow* 74-5.

and learned conventions can be smashed up against her new imagery and relationships in a time sequence that allows little room for reflection.”<sup>47</sup> This interplay of lesbian hypervisibility performed versus lesbian hypervisibility read concretizes my argument: that the possibilities for performing sociality and lesbian sexuality enable audience teaching moments, where key issues might be pulled to the forefront of one’s aural and visual arena.

Onstage, Ellie acknowledges that with time she began to decipher what she needed and wanted most out of a relationship, which developed drastically from her initial position on romance as a young woman. And yet her fiery passion for true love is still there—eloquent, alive, and infectious—despite her succession of past lovers parading in and out of the rustic cabin. Ellie wants, and she wants badly enough to finally act on it. There is a usefulness to this temporal aspect of identity: that in inhabiting her lesbianism in this way, and moving forward through the snow that has trapped her immobile—stuck both metaphorically and physically—Ellie can finally move away from her past, characterized by a string of failed relationships, and move forward into a future, one that reimagines the possibility of a public life, where coming out in the public and private sphere provides points of access to personal and social change.<sup>48</sup>

In *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, Chambers again centers the action of the play on a core group of lesbians, best friends who have been visiting a summer getaway for several years (see Figure 4.2 below). This history is unbeknownst to Eva, a heterosexual woman who arrives at the cove lost, yet newly initiated to her inner feminist. Like Peggy

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<sup>47</sup> Davy, “Constructing the Spectator” 52.

in *A Late Snow*, Eva functions as both a straight outsider and a reflective opportunity for the other female characters, as each woman inevitably explores her own notions and experiences of “the lesbian lifestyle.” As hilarity ensues, so too does a generative self-awakening, where Eva yearns to locate herself within both her fresh feminist ideals and the lesbian community. Meanwhile “her presence immediately provokes tension among the group, most notably from Dr. Kitty Cochrane, the best-selling author of a book on women’s sexuality who fears being outed by Eva, and from Lil, who worries her attraction to Eva will turn out badly.”<sup>49</sup>

Along with Kitty, Eva, and Lil the characters comprised three couples, each exhibiting diversity within a white, middle-class framework: Sue, a very wealthy older lesbian partnered with Donna, a frequent shopper; Lil, soon to be paired with Eva; Kitty, partnered with Rita, her most enthusiastic supporter; and Anne and Rae, in a stereotypical butch/femme relationship but with two grown children from former heterosexual marriages. To amplify the comedic dialogue, these established partnerships are complicated and enhanced by a cross-over pairing: for example, Lil used to date Kitty, although unlike Annie and Rae’s nine year relationship, Lil confesses she isn’t “a long-distance runner.”<sup>50</sup> Unbeknownst to Eva, oscillating just beyond the scene a startling revelation awaits: Lil is dying from cancer after previously successful chemotherapy treatments have stopped working. Her time at the cove is limited, and although she finds love for the first time in her life, she must soon say goodbye.

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<sup>49</sup> Peterson, *Women Playwrights of Diversity* 73.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Chambers, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (The JH Press Gay Play Script Series. New York: JH Press, first printing, July 1982) 22.



Figure 4.2 Jean Smart as Lil and Aphroditi Kolaitis as Annie in a 1981 The Glines (NYC) production of Jane Chambers' *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*.

The play as tutor-text remains focused: celebrating life and love, lesbian sociality, and the call for social justice. Remarkably similar to Ellie in *A Late Snow*, Dr. Kitty Cochrane fears the social repercussions if her sexual identity is revealed to the general public. Within the first few pages of *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, Chambers posits a scene in which two characters debate the politics of visibility and consequences of coming out, a surface discussion necessitated by Eva's arrival at the cove:

LIL: She seems like a nice woman. She's all right, Kitty, it's going to be okay. (*Pause.*) Knock, knock, Kitty, can you hear me through the closet door?

KITTY: If this woman blows my cover, if she goes to the media and announces Dr. Kitty Cochrane is a dyke (*She wags her finger at LIL*) do you know how David Susskind would love to get hold of that?

LIL: Deny it, Kitty. Deny everything. You're so good at that.

KITTY: The public is not ready. The public is still trying to accept the concepts of equal rights and the clitoral orgasm. It would be a catastrophe for me to come out of the closet now. It would be as incredible as if—

Gloria Steinem announced her intention to marry—Marlo Thomas. The entire Movement would shudder and collapse.<sup>51</sup>

Chambers' direct references to key figureheads in the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement would have not been lost to audiences reasonably aware of popular culture, and this exchange evidences one of the key moments in the play where intertextuality acts as a springboard for audience interpretation and for reading process. Gloria Steinem perhaps needs no introduction, although it is useful to note that in the decade prior to *Last Summer's* production, Steinem co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus along with other feminist leaders including Betty Friedan and Fannie Lou Hamer. In an article written for *Time* in 1970, Steinem advocated for lesbian marriages in the context of a utopian future she worked toward as a radical feminist activist.<sup>52</sup>

Kitty mentions David Susskind, a perhaps lesser well-known figure, but important advancer of gay rights within the realm of television. His syndicated *David Susskind Show* ran on New York affiliate television stations every Sunday night from 1966-1986,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 27. The tongue-in-cheek reference to Marlo Thomas, is, of course, rather ironic. Marlo Thomas is perhaps most well known for her 1972 album "Free to Be... You and Me," a product of second wave feminist thought and activism; the album was released as part of a *Ms. Foundation for Women* initiative. The album's contributors included major recording artists of the time, including Carol Channing, Michael Jackson, and Diana Ross. The album's content circulated expressive, safe zone messages about gender while challenging dominant gender stereotypes—encouraging children to embrace individualistic choices, as exemplified by the song "William Wants a Doll." However, a rigid heteronormative frame exists within this idyllic gender-neutral text: William only wants to play with a doll because he expects to marry a woman and become a father someday. Well before *Free to Be... You and Me*, Thomas was the star of the television sitcom, *That Girl* (1966-1971), and was only the second woman (after Lucille Ball) to carry a hit show. Steinem and Thomas are also notably heterosexual.

<sup>52</sup> Gloria Steinem, "What Would It Be Like if Women Win?" *Time Magazine* 31 August 1970.



and it featured guests who spoke compassionately about homosexuals.<sup>53</sup> In 1971, Susskind's show highlighted two gay-themed shows, one of which included a panel of seven lesbian women including lesbian activist Barbara Gittings, who told him "Homosexuals today are taking it for granted that their homosexuality is not at all something dreadful—it's good, it's right, it's natural, it's moral, and this is the way they are going to be!"<sup>54</sup>

Kitty's quip that Susskind would just love her coming out was both hilarious and accurate, as Susskind's talk show in the 1970s "provided more national air time to homosexuals than any other program," according to the *Advocate*.<sup>55</sup> Such programs indeed had a considerable impact on gay and lesbian audiences, as Susskind's show not only educated the general public—"unusual and controversial topics, including homosexuality, attracted radio and television audiences"—but it also provided a visible means by which gays and lesbians could have an unashamed voice in constructing their public image, express their stances against sexual discrimination and for social justice, and finally, come out as beacons for the closeted homosexual community.<sup>56</sup> We might read Kitty's assessment as both a sign of her personal reticence and her understandably complicated relationship to what would have been a fluctuating public image of the

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen Battaglia, *David Susskind: A Televised Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Kay Tobin and Randy Wicker, *The Gay Crusaders* (New York: Paperback Library, 1972) 220.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Alwood, "A Gift of Gab How Independent Broadcasters Gave Gay Rights Pioneers a Chance to Be Heard," *Media Q: Media/Queered: Visibility and Its Discontents* ed. Kevin G. Barnhurst (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2007) 40.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

lesbian—complicated by the mediating, “out there” counterpublic space of the cabin, where lesbianism was accepted. But beyond that generative space, non-normative sexualities carried specific political and civil consequences.

Key in Chambers’ work is the politically conscious act of visibility—being read through the performative act of coming out, and the product of that act, potential social formation and access to acknowledgement and recognition. Also too, dimensions of recognizing were under negotiation not only amongst the characters on stage, but between the characters and the audience:

EVA: I don’t understand! I tried to be polite and sociable. I tried to say the right things. I’ve never felt so left out in my life. I might as well have been speaking another language.

LIL: You were speaking another language.

EVA: I thought I had it figured out—no men, no husbands—then Rae started talking about her children.

LIL: Lesbians have children, too. Some lesbians do.

EVA: I feel like such a fool. Why didn’t you just tell me?

LIL: I couldn’t. I couldn’t just say, all the women in this cove are lesbians—because I don’t have the right to make that kind of announcement for them. They have to make the decision to tell that themselves and everybody doesn’t make the same decision at the same time—it’s a mess, that’s what it is, a mess. It’s hard on us and it’s hard on you. I’m sorry.<sup>57</sup>

At the crux of Eva’s dislocation hinges an insider/outsider orientation to language, and the powerlessness associated with silence. She is without lesbian speech. Her lexicon and taxonomies were informed not only by her heterosexual marriage, but also within a heteronormative public. This exchange strikes a delicate balance between reach/ability and remoteness, between protection and pleasure—in a setting already so divorced from the city, where “Marge Eaton has never, in recorded history, rented a cabin in Bluefish

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<sup>57</sup> Chambers, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* 48.

Cove to a heterosexual.”<sup>58</sup> Individual standpoint becomes infused with the politics of place and space; language and location knowledge is a power afforded to the insider group, and Eva woefully feels left out. Lil’s response, however, resonates with the empowering act of coming out—one that is personal, individual decision that yields high results in terms of sociality formation. Consider the cove itself as a space of fruitful, positive lesbian community—lesbians there connected an ability to speak their love of women with the power found in recognizing others like themselves. Building on the concept of language as action, of coming out as a performative political act that produces community, and of the transformative social power in conveying lesbian-feminist ideals through her plays, Chambers’ writings as tutor-texts evidences a literary step in generating the motion behind the late 1970s-early 1980s gay and lesbian movement.

The last of her plays that I will examine in this chapter, *My Blue Heaven*, presents Green Acres-like television series hilarity with a twist: lesbian affirmation and hypervisibility punctuated by a heavy insistence on the issue of marriage equality. Loosely based on her own partnership with Beth Allen, Chambers’ longtime lover since their meeting at Goddard College in 1971, *My Blue Heaven* features a lesbian couple, Molly Sanford and Josie Williams. Chambers, who wrote for television many years before, was intrigued by a compelling thought: how might lesbian themes and style function in a mainstream entertainment style tradition characterized by 1970s situation comedies including *Bonanza*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*?<sup>59</sup> Her answer was *My Blue Heaven*, which was produced by The Glines and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>59</sup> Albert Williams, “My Blue Heaven,” *Chicago Reader* (07 March 1991).

opened at the Shandol theatre on June 3, 1981 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Gay American Arts Festival in New York City. *My Blue Heaven*'s associations with past television comedies again provides a means by which to think about setting as conspicuously non-southern, vis-à-vis Castle formulation of "harkening back" by way of intertextual references. Connecting *My Blue Heaven* to *Green Acres* (1965), for example, re-writes a plot where Northerners go to the live on a rural country farm, while in this play, the South is recognizable through its very absence.

Full of wisecracks and off-the-cuff glib humor proliferates *My Blue Heaven*. The play is set in a ramshackle farmhouse somewhere in upstate New York—rounding out Chambers' predilection for placing her lesbian plays beyond the scope of traditional city life, which in a reversal of stereotype, ultimately suggests that such utopias may not be found within the metropolis after all.<sup>60</sup> Challenging metro-narrative ideologies invested in mapping urban cities as gay and lesbian migration-musts, each of Chambers' plays instead favor backward, rustic, and unfashionable locales for their subversive, lesbian-sociality potential. And, continuing her commitment to the politics of coming out, Chambers again creates a central scene in which visibility and public awareness are under negotiation:

JOSIE: You sold a book once, a whole book!

MOLLY: And it cost me my teaching job! Living the Good Gay Life did not sit well with the New York City School Board!

JOSIE: Well, write about something else.

MOLLY: You're the one who told me to write what I know! You bought that little plaque and hug it over my desk in the city: BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED. Well, financially, where I'm planted, the soil sucks.

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<sup>60</sup> For an excellent discussion of rural queer stylistics and a critique of queer metronormativity, see Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010).

JOSIE: (Hurt.) There's nothing gay about that column you write for the Farmer's Journal now.  
MOLLY: Of course there is! I can't help myself, I'm possessed!  
JOSIE: Honey, your column is about a heterosexual All-American young couple, homesteading. The Adventures of Molly and Joe.  
MOLLY: I'm Molly and you're Joe. It's the story of you and me. I just change your gender.  
JOSIE: I'm not crazy about having my gender changed.  
MOLLY: I'm not crazy about having to use your last name as my by-line. This column is the only thing I write that sees print and I'd like to see my name on it!  
JOSIE: Well, do it!  
MOLLY: I can't. If anybody on the *Farmer's Journal* were to connect Molly Sanford, homespun humor columnist with Molly Sanford, known dyke author of *Living the Good Gay Life*...  
JOSIE: That's so unlikely, honey.<sup>61</sup>

Molly's remonstrative attitude toward their reduced circumstances is palpable and surface in this early scene. After having suffered censure in the form of lawful termination from her 9<sup>th</sup> grade teaching job on the grounds of homosexuality from the New York school board—and significantly, not only publications of her lesbian lifestyle, but a doubly-damning positive portrayal of love between women, as deduced by her book's title, “Living the Good Gay Life”—the old adage “once burned twice shy” is somewhat of an understatement in Molly's emotional field. At the same time, her solution in continuing her creative drive to write has landed both partners in somewhat unfamiliar territory: away from the repressive city, secluded in a farmhouse where their sexuality is uninterrupted by social pressures and standards—including the structures that privilege heteronormativity.

Making a go of the country life, combined with their reduced financial circumstances, ultimately takes a toll on the vitality of their intimate relationship.

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<sup>61</sup> Jane Chambers, *My Blue Heaven*. The JH Press Gay Play Script Series (New York: JH Press, first printing, January 1982) 17-8.

Enmeshed in a self-sufficient domestic lifestyle, Josie, who has a master's degree in computer science, tinkers and tries her hand at pioneering earthworm communities, developing a methane generator fueled by chicken shit, and constructing a poorly engineered windmill. In maintaining her relationship with Molly, she wonders aloud: "If we never make love, are we still lesbians?"<sup>62</sup> After nearly a decade filled with strife and turmoil, characterized by city life, both women are struggling to hang on, and Molly's heteronormative "print family," appearing as a column in the local *Farmer's Journal*, is a frequent source of their discontent. It symbolizes their financial dependence on ideals they do not share as well a public life that is not available to them, and, in turn, impacts the emotional tenor and labor of their relationship.

Complication arrives in the form of two men: religious, disruptive, heavy-handed intruders. The first, Ralph Miller, an ultra-conservative editorial executive at the *American Way Book Company*, seeks to market and capitalize on Molly's relationship—more accurately, the falsely constructed relationship between Molly and Big Joe as exemplified by her column. They are two "independent, individual, courageous, hardworking...modern pioneers that people can look up to," or as Ralph says, a family that is "very special in this age of self-serving perversity."<sup>63</sup> In exchange for an advance check of seventy-five thousand dollars, he exclaims,

RALPH: Why, Mrs. Williams, we are going to make your family the most famous family in America! You and Big Joe and little Arnold—your faces will be on cereal boxes and magazine covers, we'll put you on talk shows, we'll make you America's First Family, Mrs. Williams, the real life symbol of good Christian living.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 38 and 42.

MOLLY: Oh, Josie.  
JOSIE: Oh, Molly.  
MOLLY: Oh, Mr. Miller.<sup>64</sup>

Little does Ralph know, the traditional family he sought as a beacon of conservative Christian hope in an increasingly degenerate world is in fact comprised of two lesbians, their goat, another litter of kittens in the barn, and “the horniest damned rooster in the western hemisphere,” Arnold, who doubles as Molly and Big Joe’s son in the *Farmer’s Journal* column.

Eventually, Molly and Josie confess their lie (or Molly’s hypocritical homestead family, if you ask Josie) to Ralph, and in a gesture of sheer brilliance, Molly blackmails him by threatening to out themselves to the general public and publicize their true lesbian relationship through *The American Way Book Company*. In this scene Molly outs Big Joe, or her lover of nine years, Josie:

MOLLY: (*Holding onto contract.*) Mr. Miller, meet Jo Williams.  
RALPH: (*Scanning the room.*) I beg your pardon?  
MOLLY: This is Big Joe. This is she.  
RALPH: Big Joe Williams is your husband.  
MOLLY: (*Her arm around JOSIE.*) Josephine Williams is my lover.  
RALPH: I don’t understand.  
MOLLY: Arnold is a rooster.  
RALPH: I beg your pardon?  
MOLLY: We’re lesbians, Mr. Miller. (She sees he doesn’t understand.) Gay. (*He still doesn’t get it.*) Homo-sex-u-als.  
RALPH: You mean you’ve duped the public?  
MOLLY: I only changed the gender of my partner and endowed a rooster with some human qualities.  
RALPH: You mean... You’re really...? (They nod.) The L-word? Lord God, I never met one before. (*He backs away from them.*)<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 42-3.

Ralph, unable to fathom the depths of sexual depravity he unwittingly sought out, leaves the cabin with a promise to sue the women for misrepresentation. As Act One draws to a close, the audience and readers are surprised to learn that the scenario was in fact nothing more than a figment of Molly's imagination. Josie wakes Molly and blackout to intermission.

The television-like premise of *My Blue Heaven* suggests it is worth dwelling on the seductions of realism in the first act of the play. As readers, we are duped into the construction of reality here—articulated through the dreamscape—in effect, fooled about what's really happening much in the same way that Mr. Ralph Miller is. Compulsory heterosexuality and the intentional framing and marketing of Molly's *Farmer's Journal* column fools Ralph into believing that Big Joe is a man and somewhere just around the corner, off-stage, and out of view (in a pointed reversal of the traditional representation of the lesbian figure in literature: shadowed, apparitional, and invisible). Audience members would have been equally duped, as the action takes place within the realistic performance space of the play.

The bulk of Act One of *My Blue Heaven* again heavily engages with issues of privacy and identity politics, and the reimagining of a different, better world for lesbians, one in which coming out translates into increased political visibility and equality. Although it was a dream, in coming out and introducing Big Joe Williams as Josie, Molly risks greatly and is rewarded for it. Reading with grain, we see three distinctive valences in her coming out to Mr. Miller: initially, she calls Josie her lover, then she speaks their sexuality as lesbians (thus suggesting public visibility, even within the private space of the cabin), and finally, she solidifies their “perversity” by literally and semantically



spelling out the word “homosexuals.” That Ralph struggles to interpret her meaning is not lost on the viewer, who does not share his difficulties. In a way, Ralph’s inability to grasp their sexuality, that they are lesbians, symbolizes the very closeted mind space that Molly and Josie flee in favor of their rustic cabin in the woods—where remoteness allows for lesbian possibility. However, in the repeated process of coming out excerpted above, we see the constitutive, descriptive nature of the act as well its own important particular form of heteronormative resistance.

*My Blue Heaven* departs from *A Late Snow* and *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* in a surprising way: the entire second act centers around the issue of homosexual marriage. Within a conceptual, social, and legal system of heterosexuality at the national level, this degree of consciousness-raising—advocating for lesbian marriage—within the context of the play seems surprising as well as strategically planned. Foreshadowing clues lie within the play’s title, and a minute reference in the front matter of the script, where the set is described. Both the title, *My Blue Heaven*, and the initial stage direction, “When the audience is seated, a harmonica is heard. It plays ‘For Me and My Gal.’” This song references previous films and songs of the same names.<sup>66</sup> The song “My Blue Heaven,” was originally recorded in 1928 by Gene Austin, and it has become a cover standard ever since (with notable performances by Fats Domino, Frank Sinatra, and Norah Jones). The lyrics describe a couple together, cozy by the fire, so happy in their blue heaven: “Molly and me, and the baby makes three.” That Chambers anthropomorphized the rooster, Arnold, in the play undoubtedly provided many laughs; significantly, this deft gesture again harkens back to *Green Acres* vis-à-vis a pig on the show called Arnold.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 10.

Beyond comedic value, and beyond a play's performed verisimilitude, such a direct commitment to envisioning a future where marriage equality existed between women must have been extraordinary at that time. The majority of Act Two engages with this thematic, one that is introduced by the play's second male intruder, Dr. John. The minister is a past boyfriend of Molly's, a man she couldn't marry because she was in love with a woman. Ironically, he enters *My Blue Heaven* advocating solely for visibility, social acceptance, and marriage equality:

MOLLY: It's not legal for us to get married, Johnny. (*She nervously eats a cookie.*)

DR. JOHN: It's time somebody challenged that. Homosexual matrimony was one of the major topics of our conference.

MOLLY: It was?

DR. JOHN: There are a lot of you now—our statistics say fifteen percent. Everybody's coming out of the closet. There are more of you than there are blacks. You're the major minority.

JOSIE: No kidding?

DR. JOHN: You're an issue.

DR. JOHN: I think we could get the national press.

MOLLY: My mother would have a heart attack. The Ku Klux Klan would ride up here and burn this house down.

JOSIE: It's insured.

DR. JOHN: No change occurs unless somebody's willing to take chances. (*He picks up book from shelf.*) You wrote this book. *Living the Good Gay Life*. You stuck your neck out once.

MOLLY: Once was enough.

DR. JOHN: This book has helped a lot of people, Molly. I use it in my Young Adult group sessions.

MOLLY: You do?

DR. JOHN: It helps the straight kids understand the gay kinds and makes the gay kids feel good about themselves. You did something worthwhile here.

Reading with the grain, rhetorics of coming out of the closet echo throughout Chambers' works as I have argued repeatedly in this chapter. But *My Blue Heaven* is her only play that references the performative, constitutive act of coming out in an explicit,

hypervisible manner. Here we see a culmination in the tutor text messages of social progressiveness and the fights for recognition and acknowledgement that are sprinkled across her works of drama: that coming out is significant and even central to living a public life. In fact, everyone should be doing it.

Dr. John calls homosexuals “a major minority” and places sexuality alongside a web of intersectional identity politics, linking non-normative sexuality and race. Such a move evidences awareness of cycles of saliences within the national frame—linking the Gay and Lesbian homophile movement to a lineage of progressive social movements, exemplified by the fights for civil rights and racial equality begun only a decade or two earlier—in the South. Molly’s humorous response belies a very real concern she has: fear of repercussions. Experience with publishing *The Good Gay Life*—speaking lesbian and putting her sexuality to print—has taught her that consequences are inevitable.

Incorporating the Ku Klux Klan as censure and threat carries with it clear a surface association with the South and enforced racial segregation—here again, we see evidence of Chambers’ strategic use of non-southern southernness—but fascinatingly, the presence of this paradigmatic southern threat posits a continuum of non-dominant identities (not just blacks, but gays and lesbians, too) as possibly vulnerable to house burning.

Chambers hypervisibly postulates the fight for (gay and) lesbian equality as a civil rights issue while deliberating linking sexuality to the South.

If a challenge to the heteronormative institution of marriage seems surprising, it is because that progressive, imaginative future is introduced in the play from, of all voices, a minister. Given our current LGBTQ political climate, this, of course, seems rather

familiar, as pastors in South Carolina just this year petitioned to overturn the state's ban on same-sex marriage—citing their freedom of religion.

Interestingly, we might consider the excerpt outlined above within a system of looking back, or, that sensation of *déjà vu* that I outlined earlier in this chapter. For the scholar of southern literature, seemingly recognizable correlatives and associations have contributed to and shaped our understandings of Chamber's use of non-southern southernness through deft allusions to other works of southern drama that incorporate strong lesbian themes. Could such a system of details "already seen" shift and operate in the reverse temporal direction? Analyzing Chambers' plays through surface reading techniques begs us to place it within a temporal frame that allows for a) critical examinations across works of southern drama that were produced before its publication, as in the case of allusions to particular aspects of McCullers' and Hellman's works, b) conceiving specific, individual examples as part of a process enabled or facilitated through more concurrent texts produced within the same period, say, connecting *My Blue Heaven* with *Green Acres*, and c) thinking with Chambers in our own temporal moment, that is, aligning her work from the past with events and literatures of special significance in the present. In addition to reading this scene from *My Blue Heaven* alongside recent political stances on marriage equality from South Carolina preachers, we might briefly pause to consider how Molly's book, *The Good Gay Life* itself functions as a tutor text (just as each of Chamber's lesbi-dramas does). As Dr. John says, it "helps the straight kids understand the gay kids and makes the gay kids feel good about themselves," much in the same way that the nationally visible "It Gets Better" campaign, begun in 2010,

works to communicate similar messages of hope to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans youth facing bullying and harassment in the U.S. schools and communities.<sup>67</sup>

Such is the beauty of incorporating surface reading methods alongside close readings of texts. Chamber's *A Late Snow*, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and *My Blue Heaven* each provide exceptionally rich examples through which to not only model these points, but also to utilize them in making a persuasive case for reading her dramas as works of southern literature.

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<sup>67</sup> For more on the history and scope of the "It Gets Better Project," created by the nationally syndicated sex columnist Dan Savage, consult [itgetsbetter.org](http://itgetsbetter.org).

## CONCLUSION

The bulk of this dissertation was written between the spring of 2013 and the spring of 2014, twelve months that witnessed unparalleled advancements in LGBTQ rights in U.S. politics and culture, both at the national level and within the South, the nation's region.<sup>1</sup> In June 2013, a landmark federal Supreme Court ruling in *United States v. Windsor* determined that the Defense of Marriage Act was unconstitutional; the ruling upheld constitutional guarantees of equal protection and due process in both state-sanctioned heterosexual marriages and state-sponsored same-sex marriages. The federal government could no longer refuse to recognize same-sex marriages validated by individual states. On that same day, the Supreme Court ended the challenge to California's notorious Proposition 8, thereby returning marriage equality to same-sex couples in the country's most populous state. Increased LGBTQ visibility ballooned across the national landscape, and became a hypervisible component of public discourse and culture. Barack Obama became the first U.S. President to use the word "gay" in an inaugural address, during which he linked LGBTQ rights to other national civil rights milestones, including the first women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, and the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama in 1965.<sup>2</sup> Macklemore & Ryan Lewis' hit single "Same Love" celebrating same-sex marriage peaked on *Billboard's Hot*

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<sup>1</sup> Leigh Ann Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009) 10.

<sup>2</sup> See Barack Obama's inaugural address at the ceremonial swearing-in at the U.S. Capitol during the 57<sup>th</sup> Presidential Inauguration held in Washington, D.C. on January 21, 2013.

100.<sup>3</sup> Harvey Milk, the first openly gay political official, was featured on a U.S. postage stamp. Eight more states across the country enacted marriage equality laws. Laverne Cox, an Alabama native and star of Netflix's original series *Orange is the New Black* was the first openly transgender person on the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>4</sup>

And in the South, the first half of 2014 has already seen the push for LGBTQ rights result in numerous and momentous accomplishments. Starkville became the first city in Mississippi to pass a resolution supporting the LGBTQ community, along with six other major cities in the state, including Jackson, Hattiesburg, and Oxford. The St. Louis Rams drafted Michael Sam, an openly gay college football player at the University of Missouri into the National Football League. Same-sex marriage was legalized in Arkansas, while federal judges in Kentucky, Virginia, and Texas ruled the states' gay marriage bans unconstitutional (although these decisions were later stayed). Darrin P. Gayles, of Florida, became the first openly gay African American to be confirmed as a U.S. Federal Judge.

The context of these monumental efforts has great significance for central questions that occupy this project: what are we used to seeing? How does literature intersect with national politics? In what ways have these writers explored the South, sexuality, and sociality, and what is the significance of this for southern literature, sexuality studies, and American literature? *Southern Sapphisms* explains that lesbian community is not some sort of essential or static thing, but a process of drawing relations

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<sup>3</sup> See the Seattle-based hip-hop duo Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, especially their 2012 studio album entitled *The Heist*. The track, "Same Love" was recorded during the campaign for same-sex marriage equality in Washington State.

<sup>4</sup> See the June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 issue of *Time* magazine.

between sexual desire and region, across race, class, gender, and time. Together, these four chapters explore southern sapphisms as literary *productions*, not only as products, but as performative acts of community formation that made the later critical explorations of the queer community not only possible, but necessary. Today's LGBTQ politics and culture are largely borne out of a dialogue the women writers explored in this dissertation began; these and other literary productions have written present culture into existence from the past. Reclaiming this legacy reveals new possibilities for shifting and strengthening lesbian activism and lesbian lives across the nation in the twenty-first century.

My own experience in reading and researching for this project indicates that the texts considered here represent only the very tip of an ice cube in a much larger pitcher of sweet tea. As more and more scholars explore constructions of gender and sexuality in the literature and cultures of the U.S. South, many outside the South are finally beginning to see how this work constitutes far more than just localized studies of regional spaces and identities. The temporal period between the early 1970s and the late 1990s demonstrates just how robust the advancement of American social justice culture has been, as exemplified by Women's Liberation, Civil Rights, and the Gay and Lesbian homophile movements—each of which focused on building communities through political activism and consciousness raising. This dissertation, *Southern Sapphisms: Sexuality and Sociality in Literary Productions, 1974-1997*, shows how it is possible to understand southern lesbian literary productions within not only a regional frame, but within a national one, too—a frame steeped in understanding how region and identity fuse in generating a sense of self, community, and justice.



This dissertation fills long-neglected gaps in both scholarly and popular understandings of lesbian historiography, southern literature, and American culture. Analyzing works by some of the most prominent names in American women's writing and politics since the 1970s, including Dorothy Allison, Blanche McCrary Boyd, Jane Chambers, Doris Davenport, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Mab Segrest, Shay Youngblood, and the members of the writing collective *Feminary*, I have argued that these writers and their writing are germane, even central, to the national story of lesbian history—while noting that lesbian history is, in many important ways, national history. In bringing these lesbian lives and narratives to the center of American cultural discourse, I propose that the southern regional context is crucial to better understanding the works of these women, and that the works of these women make visible the work of the nation as it seeks to redefine itself in ever more inclusive and equitable ways. These women produced literature documenting lesbian presence and influence in the world, and their literature in turn, nurtured, shaped, and sustained a southern community that engaged national-level lesbian feminist issues through their writings. These southern sapphisms transform dominant critical paradigms about lesbianism in the South and about lesbian and feminist politics in late-twentieth century national discourses; in short, twenty-first century paradigms for thinking sexuality and sociality owe a great debt to these southern lesbian writers and their treatment of ideas of the South, sex, and society.

While many of these women writers made lesbianism an explicit literary theme, they also made southern culture and southern community central to the critical and political perspectives of their works. As I have emphasized many times in the course of this project, we cannot understand expressions of lesbianism and feminism in post-1970s

American literature without also understanding the explicitly southern dynamics of those writings. I have also asserted that the writers I analyze in these four chapters remain centrally interested in a transition from sexual otherness to sexual belonging, or from social marginalization to sociality unification through their writings—whether by representing a hypervisible vocabulary of lesbianism on the literary surface, gesturing toward a discussion of the relationship between recognition and acknowledgement through a focus on performance, or exploring the tangible connections, social dimensions, and affective possibilities that thinking sex through southern food reveals. The literature these writers produce foreground and re-inscribe shifting tensions from non-normative to new normative (but not necessarily normalizing) ideas of community building.

The archival and recovery work of this dissertation has demonstrated—especially in the case of *Feminary*—that these ideas of community building adumbrated by and through these southern sapphisms subtend a rich and so far under-explored archive of literary and cultural productions. In offering these writers as representative, I make no claims to the community of writers in this volume being comprehensive: there are more writers, journals, dances, performances, works of art, communal transactions, recipes, encounters, and traces to be held, thought, eyed, tasted, and brought into this unfurling national story. I look forward to the future study this dissertation invites and urges. Undoubtedly, this study will be joined by other critical interventions similarly motivated to suture together, over time, a more exhaustive account of southern lesbian literary productions written in post-Civil Rights era United States. We can look forward to a more densely textured picture of literary analysis that will help us hypervisibly recognize

and understand the role region plays in lesbian literature and the role that lesbian identity plays in southern literature, and how southern lesbian writers conceived of and understood who they were through their works. It is with an awareness of this probability that I want to explore a few final speculations and possibilities.

To do so, I turn to Alice Walker's 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, itself a work of southern lesbian writing, as well as a work explicitly and implicitly preoccupied by the principal concerns of this dissertation. The novel invites readers to consider how identity-laden social structures (like race, class, sexuality, and place) serve to shape and influence the lives of women of color—particularly characters Shug Avery and Celie—in the 1930s era southern U.S. *The Color Purple* makes a successful analytical case because it exists in two iterations—a highly acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize winning novel (1982) and a highly acclaimed film, nominated for 11 Academy Awards (1985)—although these two cultural objects have very different relationships to lesbian representation.

Echoing the gist of chapter one, analyzing both the film and novel versions of *A Color Purple* with surface and close reading techniques allows for how the epistolary form invites a kind of surface reading by making the thoughts and embodied desires surface and hypervisible. In juxtaposition, these two iterations offer a productive contrast that redirects us to the novel's efforts to make lesbian desire and eroticism hypervisible, while illustrating the film's re-closeting gesture renders lesbian sexuality barely perceptible, esoteric, and deeply embedded.

Like *Feminary*, the epistolary novel posits an archive to be read by a wide audience, though directed to a small community of women. Often violent transactions between Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and place/time advertisements signal a specific sense of

southernness grounded in extreme racial and gender alterity, but the moral force of the novel refuses to be constrained by region. Instead, *The Color Purple* uses regionality to let the characters think beyond established or expected roles, to be creative or even aggressive in their formations of self and their explorations of lesbian sexuality. This project's future might include suggestions for thinking about sexuality beyond self and other, more as a function of place.

How might Walker's *The Color Purple* amplify the considerations I explored in chapter four, for example? Chambers' plays are interested in space as it controls the erotic and social exchanges among women in locations that are subtly South-evoking but are overtly non-specific. *The Color Purple* overwhelmingly evokes and suppresses the South, too, relying on a space it strategically relegates to setting and not destiny. The next iteration of this project might offer new ways of thinking about setting as both where things happen and where they don't. A place that is visible and ghostly: setting as, in fact, setting, as one might set on a porch: temporary, and ephemeral.

In this dissertation's next instantiation as a book, I see it engaging many of the important works of lesbian cultural studies and sexuality studies research (works by Martha Vicinus, Lillian Faderman, and Leila Rupp, for example) that have helped formulate my method and approach. Reading southern lesbian literary productions as critical interventions into wider debates concerning intersectional identities, the interconnectedness of region and sexuality, and the formation and manifestation of sociality and community illustrates a significant intervention in the field of southern sexuality studies.

Yet it also has implications for the field(s) of queer studies, not least because it foregrounds the relationship of the sexuality studies scholar to the past. The last few years have seen the field of queer studies reach a critical turning point: there is the standing question in academic consideration of how to do the history of homosexuality vis-à-vis David Halperin, but there is also, and perhaps just as revelatory, the matter of how to examine the means, the way, and the affect with which one's personal identification with the past occurs. This latter question subtends my project; in reading these southern lesbian writers, I have sought to read, too, the significance of my own identification with this archive, in the context of this scholarly endeavor.

In "Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer History" from *Feeling Backward* (2009) Heather Love notes that,

Recently, long-standing debates about gay and lesbian history have shifted from discussions of the stability of sexual categories over time to explorations of the relation between queer historians and the subjects they study. The turn from a focus on "effective history" to a focus on "affective history" has meant that critics have stopped asking, "Were there gay people in the past?" but rather have focused on questions such as: "Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?" or even, perhaps, "What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?"<sup>5</sup> (31)

I share Love's call to focus inward, accounting for our own desire to pursue, excavate, and cultivate conversations with the politically and culturally charged past. In doing so, scholars—including myself—are not simply bringing the past forward in academic endeavors; we are in constant conversation with social histories rather than mere explicators of them.

Reaching within myself, and examining my own affective experience with

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<sup>5</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007) 31.

researching and writing this dissertation, I must acknowledge my personal relationship to the material. This project has been a deeply personal one from the very beginning. I am fortunate that my research and teaching interests engage with my erotic—that is, in the sense that Audre Lorde describes.<sup>6</sup> My work has texture and feeling; as a southern lesbian, I have experienced this project as an exploratory journey into a past that is a part of my everyday present.

It is in this spirit that I conclude *Southern Sapphisms: Sexuality and Sociality in Literary Productions, 1974-1997*, with a story—a feminary of my very own, an archive in the making. It is one I discovered at the very end of this process. Just a month or two ago, I sifted through some old notes and found something surprising. Sandwiched between my annotations on specific issues of a journal from 1975, copies of poems from the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and yellowed call slips, there was a letter I'd written you. You, an old lover. As I wept and read the words written so long ago by my hand, it struck me how reflective and reflexive my work is—how this dissertation, my writing, and my research are not just parts of my identity or what I do, but they are, in fact, artifacts of my life. The letter I found serves as a reminder that my work carries a skin and scent: memory in my hands, a lived experience. It serves as a reminder that the texts I examine carry a living past, as we are always writing ourselves into history.

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<sup>6</sup> See Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984).

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