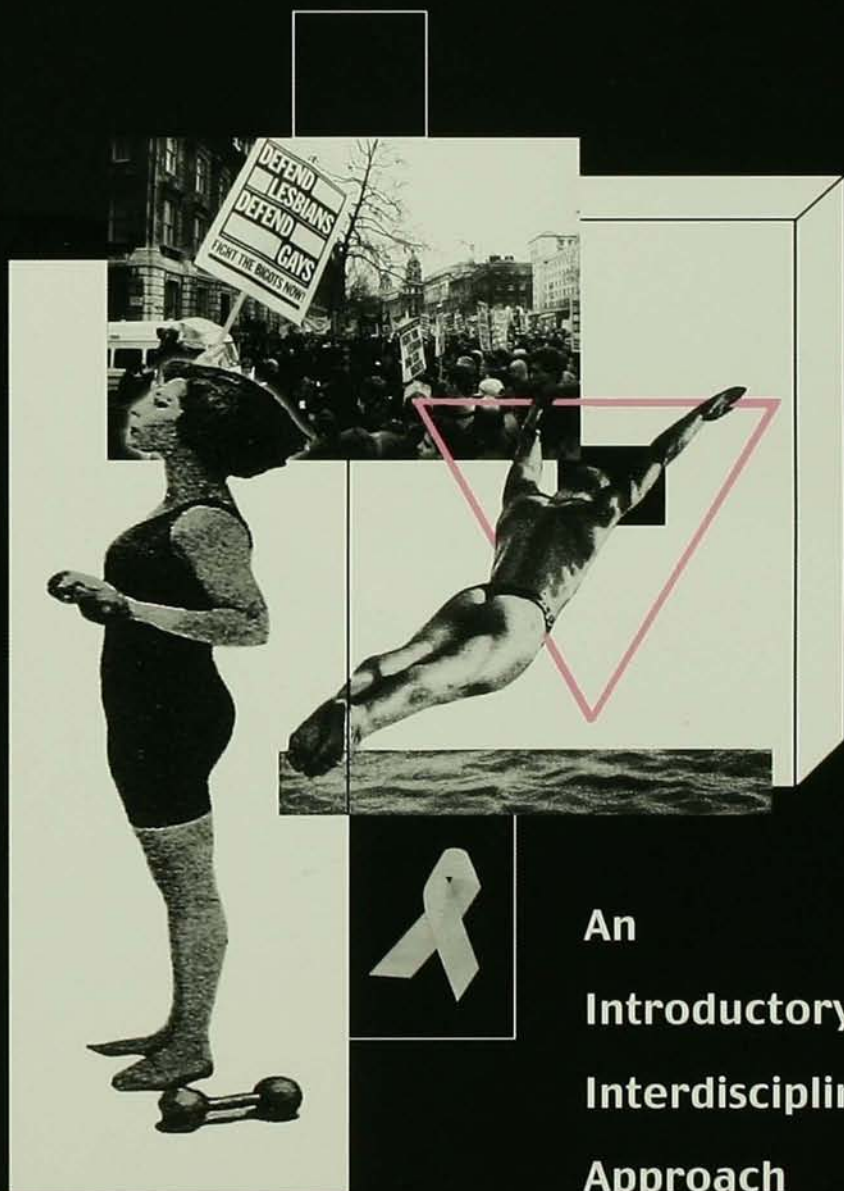


Lesbian^{and}Gay Studies



An
Introductory,
Interdisciplinary
Approach

Edited by

**THEO SANDFORT, JUDITH SCHUYF,
JAN WILLEM DUYVENDAK, JEFFREY WEEKS**

10 Lesbian Literary Studies

Liana Borghi

Like gay studies, lesbian literary studies can be said to have developed as a counter-reading strategy. We can envisage a development from individual acts of solitary or shared pleasure in reading, loving, and tracking down forgotten texts, to wider cultural projects involving political self-awareness and community-building.

In North America, Jeannette Foster's 'Foreword' to *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956) foregrounded the connection between real-life experience and scholarly research – in her case, a forty-year-long path, from a homophobic episode to the study of scientific texts, and eventually to literary history and criticism. 'Lesbian literary studies' thus revealed from its official inception the main ingredients of a possible development: the double-cross of sexuality and cultural identity with issues of affiliation and readership.

When Foster's path-breaking study of French, German and English literature was published, Barbara Grier was just 23 years old. She had been on a lesbian track for seven years, and from her meeting with Foster stemmed the literary criticism of the pioneering lesbian magazine *The Ladder* (1956–70), aimed at mapping lesbian writing past and present – mostly minor characters in high literature, or pulp fiction. The essays collected in the 1975 edition of *The Lesbian in Literature* reviewed over 2,000 books.¹

It almost seemed as if establishing a literary tradition was merely a question of retrieving 'the pearls of our lost culture', but studies in lesbian and gay cultures were then, and have been since, a construction hectically under way.² 'We believe that lesbian studies is essentially a grassroot movement,' stated Margaret Cruikshank in her introduction to *Lesbian Studies*, outlining at the same time the difficulties encountered by lesbians, personally and professionally, in the academic world.³

By that time lesbian feminism was firmly established in a troubled but strong alliance with the women's movement. A marker of this alliance, and of the non-sexualized political lesbianism of the 1970s, was Adrienne Rich's theorization of a lesbian continuum that posits for all women a cross-cultural and transhistorical latency of lesbianism, parallel to the grounding of every lesbian identity in (female) constructions of sex and gender.⁴ If again it seemed a question of retrieving the pearls of a common identity, differences as well as difference among, between and within women were also under theoretical construction.

Audre Lorde, who had been one of the first to insist on 'how important differences are in our lives', said in an interview: 'The poem happens when I, Audre

Lorde, poet, deal with the particular instead of the “UNIVERSAL”.⁵ But her friend Adrienne was not far behind in refiguring identity, earlier as a ‘coat of many colors’, and later, in ‘The politics of location’, as a form of hybrid consciousness, unmasking doctrines of objectivity and sustaining the possibility of cross-racial political solidarity based on location, embodiment and experience.

Narrative, observes Judith Roof, cannot exist or operate separately from ‘identity, ideology, subjectivity, and sexuality – by which we organize existence and experience’.⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that the main topics under discussion in the 1970s became the much-revised core of subsequent lesbian literary studies:⁷ the definition and theorization of the lesbian subject and lesbian literature in all its complex inner specificity and diversity; the ‘ghosting’, the spiriting away of lesbian characters and authors; the creation of a lesbian reader and text; the transmission of lesbian literature (media, publishing, the arts, the new technologies, teaching); and the relationship between heterosexual narrative structure and lesbian plots.

Over the past ten years – as the gay and lesbian canon expanded in breadth and depth, lesbian bodies became overtly sexualized, and lesbian identity fragmented and contradicted – these questions have been asked in a more complex language rooted both in feminist and gay theory, and in a variety of critical trends, from deconstruction to cultural studies. Lately, with the focus shifting from feminism to the gender-effacing challenge of queer theory, lesbian representation has reached yet another of its recurrent crisis points.

Although Sally Munt writes hopefully that ‘our literary tradition is a history of the linguistic traces of a common identity’,⁸ according to Sue-Ellen Case ‘the very term “lesbian” is slipping semiotically on the banana peel of mainstream and academic fashion’. In certain circles it has been evacuated and overwritten by the queer-derived *dyke*.⁹ Indeed, nowadays the lesbian is not only apparitional and liminal but also metaphorical: a sexual subject position indicating not only a situation in space but the possibility of a heterotopia.¹⁰ And if ‘lesbian’ is a contested word subjected to continuous renegotiation – a term that both constitutes and is constituted by subjectivities defined around sets of sexual desires – lesbian literature can only be an equally contested space where the process of defining subjects, contexts and meanings is constantly represented. Thus the transition (individual or collective) from gender rebellions to nameless but dangerous intimacies, to concepts of identity, and now to queer politics, involves issues of identification and representation that closely concern literary criticism. Establishing a canon and mapping fluid cultural parameters is a crucial commitment for writers, readers and critics alike.

After over three decades of militancy, as homosexuality becomes more visible and mainstream, the question of what exactly a gay or lesbian book is becomes harder to answer, and it is not by chance that so many critical texts of the past decade begin by interrogating that same question. Although we may surmise that Jeanette Winterson was nominated for the Lambda Award because she is an out lesbian, the fact that in 1993 she received the award for *Written on the Body*, a novel the gender of whose protagonist is never revealed, shows how much has changed from lesbian feminist days, when such golden tags were reserved for

novels written by lesbians for lesbians featuring lesbian characters and reflecting lesbian political concerns.

If the utopian stage is over, the deconstructing stage is on. A wealth of new criticism is opening up new fields of enquiry where feminism may meet queer theory, sexuality interrogate narrative, passing and queering reflect upon each other, lesbian performance address the end of print culture, and Freud himself become a friendly fetish. The postmodern, post-structuralist shift established in the late 1980s now coexists happily with declaredly lesbian feminist publications.¹¹ If for a time these seemed a little too concerned with authorial identities, too thematic and descriptive, prone to what Eve Sedgwick has called 'weak theoretical acts'¹² as compared to the strong (and sometimes abstruse) critical performance of queer theory, the gap has now almost closed. The latest full-length studies, especially those by Julie Abraham, Carolyn Allen, Marilyn Farwell, Sally Munt and Judith Roof,¹³ have given us narratological tools that link reading strategies to the reconstruction of the lesbian canon pursued by so many of us in different fields and countries. Although Gabriele Griffin, among others, fears that the construction of lesbian 'classics' may constitute an exclusionary practice, there can be little doubt about the value of Emma Donoghue's and Lisa Moore's reconstruction of a British 'sapphic' literary canon of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which has shown yet again the importance of understanding changes in concepts of sexual identity in distant as well as recent history. Judith Schuyf's discussion, in this book, of the concept of 'knowledge' as central in the development of lesbian identity is a good case in point.¹⁴

But reconstructing the canon may certainly be viewed as a power move, and not just because we tend to read the past according to our wants and needs – to paraphrase Sedgwick, was there ever a lesbian Sappho? Most answers to that primary question, 'What is lesbian literature?' or 'What counts for lesbian literature?' (as Sally Munt asks, echoing Diana Fuss) involve issues of power and resistance to the varied and complex heteropatriarchal practice of eradicating lesbian desire. How not/to elide lesbianism by avoiding self/censorship is a topic also covered by Terry Castle's argument on the dematerialization of the lesbian – the well-known 'ghosting' effect in cinema, art and culture which materially re/inscribes lesbian in/visibility. Possibly because of lesbian investment in women's politics, the feminist effacement of lesbianism (Cheshire Calhoun's 'gender closet') has also been scrutinized time and again; recently by renee hoogland who explores various patterns of disclosure and concealment prescribing 'participative thinking' as an antidote. The term, borrowed from Bakhtin, indicates, more than a reading practice, 'a mode of *un-indifferent* thinking which entails engagement, commitment, involvement, concern, and indeed, *interest*'. On a similar wavelength, Kathleen Martindale laments the self-inflicted damage done by lesbians who do not read enough. By resisting reading they make lesbian theory and literature invisible, and fail to take advantage of their transforming power. This resistance appears especially regrettable in view of the traditional scarcity of lesbian texts.¹⁵

Indeed, literary visibility depends on access to publishing. Rightly, Catharine Stimpson reminds us of the power of reviewers, and many of us who are in print could add stories about the importance of adequate circulation, and the tyranny of

sales figures. Many authors and critics discuss in books and magazines the concomitant weight of sexual, social and racial factors on the access to publishing. It may hearten some that Isabel Miller's novel *Patience and Sarah* (1973) was self-published, but umpteen other texts, especially those of lesbians who are less privileged and/or live in countries of stronger homophobia and/or fewer resources, may never see print. Homophobic censorship has caused lesbian references to be encoded (Gertrude Stein's 'Cow', Daphne Du Maurier's 'Cairo') and hidden behind masks and symbolic markers. Astute reading strategies, like Judith Butler's 'queering', are needed to enable the reader to detect a 'passing' text. Other impediments, as Kathleen Martindale and Sue Ellen Case have also pointed out, may be caused by the discriminatory distinction between high and low cultures, and others still by the dearth of translations from non-hegemonic cultures. Whereas the use of French lesbian/feminist theories is quite common in lesbian criticism from English-speaking countries, theories from other countries are seldom 'imported'. A rare application of the theories developed by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective is to be found in an essay on lesbians in literature by Gabriele Griffin. The figuration of the symbolic mother and the concept of empowerment are used by Griffin to read the negotiation of power differentials by the mother–daughter–lover triangle in Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp*.¹⁶

Obviously, a passion for theory permeates recent criticism. Dualisms and dichotomies have become literary sins of our postmodern times, and open-ended texts are virtuous in more senses than one. Sally Munt frowns on the reactionary constraint of dualisms used in literary criticism, as in the case of the moralistic attitude evidenced in Gillian Spragg's critique of Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart*. Unfashionable forms of utopian separatism (as critiqued by Sonia Andermahr) also fall under her stern scrutiny. But she looks with approval at forms of textual and political freedom, like Jeanette Winterson's crossing over from marginal to dominant culture and vice versa in her fiction, or Lisa Henderson's avoidance of dichotomies like pornography/censorship in her critical work.¹⁷

There are many other examples of a similar position-taking. Teresa De Lauretis also writes some of her texts with the intent of defusing polarities. Her reading of Sheila MacLaughlin's 1987 film *She Must Be Seeing Things* disarms both the butch/femme and the s/m themes by casting the argument in terms of the relationship between fantasy and the real. Her essay 'The essence of the triangle' depolarizes the controversy between essentialism and constructionism, which has affected literary criticism as much as any other field.¹⁸

We find evidence of the 'intimate' intertextuality typical of lesbian criticism – an intricate pattern of careful cross-references often based on friendships, alliances, shared experience, esteem – in Tamsin Wilton, who uses similar strategies to defuse polarizations concerning identity, and to construct positive links with queer theory. In *Lesbian Studies*, in a short section on 'the metaphorical dyke', she dubs identity essentialist and redundant, and opts instead for identification, which is an interactive concept. But the likely attack on the politics of identity does not materialize. Rather, Wilton makes a detour into feminist theory and ends up justifying the contingent use of the term 'lesbian' on the basis of Julia Kristeva's politically expedient use of the term 'woman'.¹⁹

Paulina Palmer also tackles the representation of identity in fiction. In *Contemporary Lesbian Writing* she discusses the shift in recent lesbian narrative toward postmodernist strategies that highlight the fictionality of a text, moving away from identity politics towards unstable sexual and textual identities. The tortuousness of sexual identification and our lack of control on choice are exemplified by showing the 'queer' interaction of sex and fantasy in the work of Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Schulman and Jane DeLynn. In her book on the erotics of loss, Carolyn Allen also reads Winterson alongside Djuna Barnes and Rebecca Brown so as to reconstruct a narrative genealogy. Her neo-Freudian approach blends in fascinating ways with post-structuralism to uncover the dynamics of obsessive love, fusion and desperate lack performed in their narratives and to open up dark places, sexual as well as epistemological, between women lovers.

Those of us, from Sandra De Perini to Teresa De Lauretis, who would agree that it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian, should read Julie Abraham's book on lesbian writing and modernist historical fiction, *Are Girls Necessary?*. Her opinion is that, for the timespan she deals with, all it takes to make a lesbian 'is one woman and a novel' (xvii). But the novel, unfortunately, is a formula fiction based on the very heterosexual plot which lesbian writers have attempted to circumvent in so many ways. This is why Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf, Mary Renault, Marguerite Yourcenar, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Bryher turned to history to reach beyond the limits imposed by the formulaic nature of the lesbian novel. Abraham, of course, is not the only one to address the lesbian subversion of heterosexual plots and plot structure. Elizabeth Meese, Terry Castle, Teresa De Lauretis and Janet Montefiore have also worked on this topic.²⁰ In her latest book, *Come As You Are*, Judith Roof focuses specifically on the rhetoric of visibility in coming-out narratives, which however tends to relocate homosexual characters within the larger heteronarratives from which they had been excluded.

The suspicion arises that critics may be driven to look for forms of lesbian narrative subversion by that romantic hope to validate lesbian identity described by Sally Munt in *Heroic Desire* (1998). And this validation is not only directed toward authors and characters, but also extended to readers. Most of the critical strategies I have outlined so far both address and create an ideal lesbian reader who can be somehow repositioned, 'changed' (and perfected?) by intervening in our understanding of storytelling and the functioning of narrative. Because, as Marilyn Farwell hopefully explains, the metaphoric lesbian subject exceeds discursive and narrative boundaries whether in experimental or traditional narratives, and by so doing may secure narrative agency for women readers. And this is perhaps the sustaining metanarrative of our lesbian literary studies.²¹

Notes

1 See Jeannette Foster's foreword to her own *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Diana Press, 1975), and Barbara Grier's afterword to that same text, p. 356, for a description of the various editions of *The Lesbian in Literature*. Noteworthy

is also Barbara Grier et al., *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1981).

2 The quotation is from Suzanne Raitt (1995) in her edited collection, *Volcanoes and Pearl Divers. Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies* (London: Harrington Park Press, 1995).

3 Margaret Cruikshank *Lesbian Studies. Present and Future* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982), p. xiv.

4 Marilyn Farwell argues that 'the lesbian subject of this century is dependent on the expansion of the narrated categories of woman' in *Heterosexual Plots & Lesbian Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 18. See also her discussion on feminism and the black lesbian community, especially, p. 157. I am including Monique Wittig in the 'non-sexualized' category, although her constructionist position ('one is not born a lesbian') does not fit cultural lesbianism.

5 Interview in Claudia Tate (ed.), *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1984), pp. 114, 109.

6 Judith Roof, *Come As You Are. Sexuality & Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) p. xvi. Adrienne Rich, 'Notes toward a politics of location', in Adrienne Rich *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986).

7 I am thinking in particular of Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men. Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Morrow, 1981); Judy Grahn, *The Highest Apple. Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (San Francisco: Spinsters Inc., 1985); Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women. Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989* (Boston: Beacon, 1990); Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing. Dreams, Desire, Difference* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992); Elizabeth Meese, *(Sem)Erotics* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Patricia Duncker, *Sisters & Strangers. An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian. Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Gabriele Griffin, *Heavenly Love? Lesbian Images in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (London: Routledge, 1994). I am not listing Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde, whose literary essays deserve a special discussion.

8 Sally Munt (ed.) *New Lesbian Criticism. Literary and Cultural Readings* (London and New York: Harvester, 1992), p. xi.

9 Sue-Ellen Case, *The Domain-Matrix. Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 1.

10 For a discussion of these figurations see Marilyn Farwell, Elizabeth Meese and Bonnie Zimmerman in *Professions of Desire. Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, ed. Bonnie Zimmerman and George E. Haggerty (New York: NLA, 1995); and Liana Borghi 'Liminali and others – but mostly vamps, dragons and women's SF', in G. Covi (ed.), *Critical Studies on the Feminist Subject* (Trento: Università di Trento, 1997) pp. 101–25. See also the discussion on the 'lesbian' as a utopian space in Jagose *Lesbian Utopics*. De Lauretis has dealt with the concept of heterotopia, and so does Sally Munt at the end of *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* (London: Cassell; New York: New York University Press, 1998). According to Foucault, a heterotopia is an absent commonality between a large number of possible orders. A simple definition of the term would point to a conceptual space where a new and different perspective is possible. In her discussion, Munt describes it as an 'enabling idea which permits the imagination to reconfigure space' (pp. 168–9).

11 See three publications on postmodern culture of the 1980s: respectively British, American and Canadian: *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, ed. Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge (London: Pandora, 1994), *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), and Kathleen Martindale, *Un/Popular Culture. Lesbian Writing after the Sex Wars* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997) and Sonya Andermahr's overview, "'There's nowt so queer as

folk”: lesbian cultural studies’, in *Straight Studies Modified. Lesbian Interventions in the Academy*, ed. Gabriele Griffin and Sonya Andermahr (London: Cassell, 1997).

12 Eve K. Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid reading and reparative reading’, in *Novel Gazing. Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 23.

13 Julie Abraham, *Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Carolyn Allen, *Following Djuna. Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Sally Munt, *Heroic Desire*.

14 Emma Donoghue, *Passions between Women. British Lesbian Culture 1668–1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993); Lisa Moore, *Dangerous Intimacies. Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

15 Cheshire Calhoun, ‘The gender closet. Lesbian disappearance under the sign “women”’, *Feminist Studies*, 21 (1) (Spring 1995); repr. in *Lesbian Studies. A Feminist Studies Reader*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 209–32. renée hoogland, *Lesbian Configurations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 135; Martindale, *Un/Popular Culture*, pp. 35–36, 40.

16 See Catharine Stimpson, ‘Afterword: lesbian studies in the 1990s’, in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), pp. 377–81; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Gabriele Griffin, ‘“We are family”: lesbians in literature’, in Griffin and Andermahr, *Straight Studies Modified*.

17 See Munt’s introduction to *New Lesbian Criticism*, pp. xx–xxi.

18 See ‘Sexual indifference and lesbian representation’, *Theater Journal*, 40 (2) (1988): 155–77; ‘The essence of the triangle’, *Differences*, I (Summer 1989): 3–37 and also her most recent book, *The Practice of Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

19 Tamsin Wilton, *Lesbian Studies. Setting an Agenda* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 42–3.

20 Janet Montefiore in ‘Listening to Minna: realism, feminism, and the politics of reading’, in Raitt *Volcanoes*, pp. 123–46. See also Jean E. Kennard, ‘Ourselves behind ourself: a theory for lesbian readers’ (1984), in *Gender and Reading*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickert (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) and Maaïke Meijer, ‘Poetry and seduction. On reading as a lesbian’, in *Beyond Limits. Boundaries in Feminist Semiotics and Literary Theory*, ed. Liesbeth Braiwer (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit, 1990), pp. 97–110.

21 See Munt *Heroic Desire*, p. 10 and Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots*, pp. 17–19.