Hidden Desire: Lesbians in History

Lesbianism has generally been ‘hidden from history’ and difficult to research. Discuss.

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To reference this essay (Harvard Style):
<https://gipsyh.wordpress.com/2016/01/19/lesbian-desire-hidden-from-history/>
Lesbian history has typically been under theorised and under researched, characterised by silence and the denial of lesbian subjectivity. As Sedgwick (in Vicinus 1994: 58) maintains “ignorance now and in prior times can be willed”. Lesbianism was deliberately ‘hidden’ to avoid exposing ‘innocent’ women to the concept. The Lesbian History Group (1989: 2) argues, “every group needs access to its own history”; depriving lesbians of their history keeps them invisible, isolated and powerless. Similarly Faderman (1997: 154) argues for the need of lesbians to write their own history and thus produce work divested of a heterocentric position.

Lesbian historiography has traditionally focused on three main areas

1. The retrieval and reconstruction of individual lesbians and communities.
2. The exploration of major paradigms of lesbian behaviour, namely romantic friendships and butch-femme roles.
3. The question of how modern lesbian identity emerged.

There have been few cross-cultural studies and little attempt to determine the influence of lesbians on broader ideology and mainstream theory (Vicinus 1996: 236). It is essential to place lesbians central to history since lesbians, and lesbian-like women, are mechanisms of social change; affecting both men and women by challenging them to re-think attitudes and behaviour. The presence of lesbians also influences broader laws, policies and medical theory (Vicinus 1994: 67). It is important to respect that lesbian experience is not homogenous but varies across times, cultures, contexts and individuals. Sexual behaviour and identity intersects with ‘race’, class and other variables. Weeks (1996: 42) argues that no universalistic lesbian history is possible because the social implications of same-sex sexual activity are culturally and historically unique.

In this essay I look broadly at lesbian history before the 1950s, with a focus on Anglo-centric material relating to the 18\textsuperscript{th}, 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. I use the term ‘lesbian’ broadly to describe self-identified lesbians, women who engage in sexual activity with women and lesbian-like women. Lesbian history is difficult to
research since the concept and language of modern lesbianism emerged around the 1920s. Therefore in the period before the 20th century, historians encounter a dilemma of labelling women ‘lesbians’ or of trivialising same-sex relationships by denying their sexual component. Difficulties in researching also arise from the lack of primary sources, as many letters and diaries have been destroyed, suppressed or altered to deny their subjects sexuality.

In the second part of the essay I examine how lesbians have been ‘hidden from history’ through silence and denial. Silence was considered essential in keeping lesbians invisible from the public gaze and thus not exposing others to the ideas. For this reason lesbianism was not criminalised in England and America, although lesbians were still prosecuted. Similarly in the military, explicit mention of lesbians is absent from records and policies, however the policing of suspect lesbian behaviour exposed many to the idea and assisted in the formation of a lesbian identity. Medical discourse categorised lesbians, thus making them visible, but as ‘deviant’ subjects. Social attitudes and the subsequent self-censorship of lesbians indicate that silence was not only imposed from the top down but was generated at an individual level as well.

A definition of what constitutes a ‘lesbian’ is needed, to a degree, for historical research and analysis. However it is vital not to impose modern standards and terminology on actions that occurred in the past. While the physical act may be similar, the social implications are profoundly different throughout cultures in history (Weeks 1996: 42). By reading past events through modern discourse or theory the actions become distorted and their meanings changed. It is important to consider the historical and social context of the time before labelling women ‘lesbians’; historians are dealing with time periods before the emergence of modern ‘lesbian’ identity and concepts (Rupp 1991: 398). The term ‘lesbian’ originates from the Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos who wrote poems about lesbian love around 630BC (Baker and Tropiano 2004: 24). The term appears
sporadically throughout history from this time but women did not begin consciously self-identifying as lesbians until the 1920s.

Rupp (1991: 398) argues scholars risk labelling label women, who may have fiercely rejected the notion, as ‘lesbian’ or risk trivialising women’s relationships by indicating they are asexual. However The Lesbian History Group (1989: 14) argues that to confine the use of the term ‘lesbian’ to those who would have used it themselves would further render lesbians invisible in history. Present day self-identification and ‘coming out’ was not an issue in the past since lesbians were not visible (Vicinus 1994: 60). Vicinus (1994: 57) cautions against hastily categorising and defining women’s sexual behaviour since this narrows conceptualisation of historical possibilities. Women with same-sex desires affirmed their sense of identity through available representations and it is essential that historians consider how people described themselves and their relationships rather than simply labelling and defining them (Ford 1996: 118).

There is no clear consensus on the definition of a ‘lesbian’ due to disagreement over whether sexual contact is a vital component or not. For Lillian Faderman (1981: 18)

“‘lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives”

Broad definitions, such as this, have been criticised for removing sexuality from lesbians’ lives however a definition with a focus on sexual contact is also problematic since there is an important distinction between identity and behaviour. There are self-defined lesbians who have never had sexual relations with other women and a broad category of women who engage in sexual activity with women but do not identify as lesbian (Rupp 1991: 408). There are also women who adopt a lesbian identity as a political identity challenging patriarchy and the heterosexual norm.
Heterosexuality needs homosexuality for its own definition, constructing the heterosexual norm against a ‘deviant’ sexuality. Hoagland (1997: 195-196) reasons that “to define ‘lesbian’ is to succumb to a context of heterosexuality, to invoke a context in which lesbian is not the norm”. Patriarchal society enforces heterosexuality as a means of controlling women; the label ‘lesbian’ is used by men against women who cross the boundary of her sex role and are thus seen to be challenging male dominance (Matthews 1984: 115). Women are forced back into their ‘rightful’ place by lesbian accusations. Actual lesbian experiences are suppressed to prevent a different, more positive, understanding of lesbianism emerging (Lesbian History Group 1989: 16). Few primary sources about lesbian experience in history exist and of those that do many have been suppressed or altered.

Researching lesbian history is difficult because of the lack of primary sources. In a patriarchal society women’s history is always difficult to research because fewer sources about women exist (Lesbian History Group 1989: 3). Due to hegemonic heterosexuality, as the dominant sexuality, even fewer sources exist about lesbianism. Lesbians often attempted to hide their identity and thus did not leave records of their lives. As Rupp (1991: 409) reasons

“not only have women who loved women in the past been wisely reluctant to leave evidence of their relationships to the prying eyes of a homophobic society, but what evidence they did leave was often suppressed or destroyed”

Faderman (1997: 149) argues that many writers would have been intimidated into silence about their lesbian experiences in order to prevent prejudice; therefore few works by lesbians have been produced before the 1970s. Furthermore families may destroy records that are seen as embarrassing or shameful. Ford (1996: 125) argues that attention needs to be paid to silence and the power relations that result in that silence. Similarly Vicinus (1994: 58) points to the power of not naming, of the unsaid, as crucial means of conceptualising
the past. Silence and denial are used by a number of historians to reject subject’s lesbianism.

Historians attempt to ‘normalise’ lesbians by out right denying their relationships with women or by creating doubt (Lesbian History Group 1989: 4). Faderman (1997: 150) argues biographers commonly deny their subject’s sexuality by discounting intense expressions of love towards women and searching for a hidden man of affection:

“What can it mean when a woman expresses great affection for another woman? … It means she is trying to get a man through her. What can it mean when a woman grieves for years over the marriage…of a woman friend? It means that she is really unhappy because she had hoped to procure her friends husband for herself.”

Historians have distorted lesbian history by the avoidance of the obvious or in an attempt to ‘salvage’ the reputation of their subject. Some will even modify primary sources to confirm their position.

There is evidence that historians and biographers have altered letters and diary entries to deny lesbian desire. Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Emily Dickinson’s Biographer and niece, hid what her aunt had expressed without self-consciousness, a long-term relationship with Sue Gilbert (Faderman 1997: 151). For example in *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* (1932) Bianchi published a letter to Sue which read:

“… Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday? Shall I indeed behold you, not ‘darkly, but face to face’ – or am I fancying so and dreaming blessed dreams from which the day will wake me? I hope for you so much and feel so eager for you – feel I cannot wait” (in Faderman 1997: 152)

However in 1958 Thomas Johnson published the complete, unedited letter that reads quite differently:

“… Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? Shall I indeed behold you, not 'darkly, but face to face' or am I *fancying* so and dreaming blessed dreams from which the day will wake me? I hope for you so much and feel so eager for you, feel I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you – that the
expectation once more to see your face again, makes me hot and feverish and my heart beats so fast” (in Faderman 1997: 152)

Letters are often criticised as simply the norm in language for expressing friendships in Victorian England since ‘effusive’ language was ‘fashionable’ at the time. Nevertheless it is vital to use primary sources such as letters and diaries to discover how women described their identity and their relationships.

Lesbianism has come to be regarded by historians as a sexual act rather than a union of love, admiration, concern and tenderness (Faderman 1981: 37). Romantic love and sexual impulse used to be unrelated however today they are intrinsically linked and it is this discourse which historians attempt to impose on the past. Historians desire a high standard of proof or certainty about an individual’s sexual desire (Lesbian History Group 1989: 7). Critics want solid evidence of sexual activity between women before they are deemed lesbian. Obviously little evidence of this kind exists for both homosexual and heterosexual relationships.

Legitimate lesbianism continues to depend of evidence of sexual consummation whereas heterosexuality does not. Cook (in Rupp 1991: 409) argues

“Genital ‘proofs’ to confirm lesbianism are never required to confirm the heterosexuality of men and women who live together for twenty, or fifty, years”.

Vicinus (1994: 59) uses the Ruskins, Carlyles, and George Bernard Shaw and Charlotte Payne Townsend as examples of unconsummated marriages among British Intellectuals that were still considered valid unions and who retained their status as heterosexuals. Higher standards of proof are imposed on lesbian relationships because the ideology of women as asexual hinders the acceptance of lesbian desire.
The historical denial of lesbians coincides with the suppression, denial and control of women’s sexuality in general (Vicinus 1996: 235). Cook (in Vicinus 1994: 57) argues

“the historical denial of lesbianism accompanies the persistent refusal to acknowledge the variety and intensity of women’s emotional and erotic experiences”

The ideology of the middle class Victorian women as sexually repressed, with no sexual urges manifests itself in the construction of a passionless, moral and respectable woman. Summers (1975: 371) argues that although ‘lesbian’ activity occurred it was not possible to forge a strong lesbian identity in a culture where women were only conceptualised as wives and mothers. However middle class women formed passionate, committed relationship, which may or may not have included genital contact, known as romantic friendships. Since sexual intercourse was equated with penetration by the phallus what these ‘pure’ women did with each other was not conceived as ‘sexual’ (Newton 1991: 284). Provided these women still appeared feminine, relationships between them were not condemned but seen by men as useful ‘training’ for heterosexual sex and marriage. Many of these women strenuously denied the connotations of a lesbian identity because they conducted their relationship within the boundaries of morality and respectability. Many historians have denied romantic friendships as there is no explicit proof of genital contact.

Lesbian history is characterised by silence and denial. Due to fear of exposing women to the notion of lesbianism, authorities sought to keep it invisible from the public gaze. The absence of lesbian legal prosecution was “a tactic of annihilation by non-recognition” (Summers 1975: 159). In Britain in 1921 the attempt to make female homosexuality illegal failed because to make lesbianism visible was to ‘spread its offence’ and corrupt ‘innocent’ women who were too ‘weak’ to resist the temptation (Jeffreys 1985: 113). It was argued lesbianism would cause “our race to decline” subsequently Lieutenant Moore-Brabazon (in Jeffreys 1985: 114) outlined three possible solutions for combating lesbianism;
the death penalty would “stamp them out”; mental asylums would “get rid of them” but

“the third way is to leave them entirely alone, not to notice them, not to advertise them… I believe that is the best method now, these cases are self-extirpating. To adopt a Clause of this kind would harm by introducing into the minds of perfectly innocent people the most revolting thoughts.”

Judith Butler (in Ford 1995a: 35) reasons “lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable”. The legal system actively constructed notions of ‘normal’ female sexuality and thus stigmatised lesbians (Ford 1995a: 34). Although lesbianism was never criminalised in England, America or Australia it is a common misconception that there have been no laws against it.

Lesbian acts were punishable by death in medieval and early modern Europe. The 1260 French law code states a woman who engages in ‘sodomy’ “shall lose a member each time, and on the third must be burnt”. It is suggested, in contemporary lesbian literature, that the earliest recorded execution under these laws occurred in 1477, in Speier, when a woman was drowned for lesbian activity (Baker and Tropiano 2004: 51). Influential Italian cleric Sinistrari (in Brown 1991: 74) declared women who were lesbians, with guilt being determined on the presence of an enlarged clitoris, were to be sentenced to death by hanging, followed by burning at the stake. The death penalty, in the form of burning, also existed in Spain in the mid 16th century. It is unknown how many women were burnt as witches or how many of these women were being punished for lesbian activity. However many lesbians would have internalised the prevalent social attitudes thus engaging in self-censorship and furthering the culture of silence. Law code at this time was based on Christian models of appropriate sexuality and behaviour

Medieval law was largely influenced by the religious ideology that homosexuality was a crime against the laws of god and nature. Lesbian sexual activity was
generally ignored since it was believed to occur for the enhancement of ‘real’ sex or by women attempting to emulate men and thus ‘ascend to a more perfect state of nature’ (Brown 1991: 71). However, as illustrated above, lesbians were persecuted and in the 16th century, Genevan jurist Germain Colladon advised against the usual description of the crime since “a crime so horrible and against nature is so detestable and because of the horror or it, it cannot be named” (Brown 1991: 75). Lesbianism was ‘the sin which cannot be named’ and thus there are few records and traces of lesbian behaviour in this period. However it is evident that anxiety about lesbian activity was prevalent, even within the church. In 13th century Europe, church rules were altered to prevent nuns sharing a bed and visiting other nuns in their rooms; lights were required to be kept on all night and doors must remain unlocked (Brown 1991: 69). There are no recorded reasons for the changes in procedure, indicating that silence was still the preferred defence against lesbianism. Similar concern and a culture of silence can also been seen in the military’s treatment of suspected lesbians.

There was an anxiety that women’s services might attract or produce ‘masculine type women’ or lesbians during the mass mobilisation for world war two (Ford 1995b: 81). Policies and actions were used to prevent masculine appearance and manner. For example the female uniform included a wide brimmed hat, not a cap, and ‘battledress’ (trousers, jackets and boots) was restricted to proper use. One senior AWAS recalls

“we discouraged the sort of masculinity…where people went around with their hands in their pockets and stood with their feet wide apart and stand at ease position”. (Ford 1995b: 87)

Sexologists saw a connection between women’s desire to join the military and lesbianism that was equated with gender inversion at the time. Therefore it was thought that women with a ‘masculine’ disposition would join the military to be able to freely wear men’s attire. The uniformed female body was a sight of unease, however there was official silence on the issue of lesbianism.
Explicit mention of ‘lesbians’ or female homosexuality is absent from military records but the obsession with masculinity, or inadequate femininity, indicates the fear of lesbian activity. Roommates were continually split up and rotated and ‘special friends’ where sent to different posts (Ford 1995b: 96). Officers performed random patrols of rooms at night where the barracks rules included ‘NO sitting on another girls bed’ and ‘NO arm in arm’. Lesbian ‘witch hunts’ were avoided to prevent discrediting the corps with speculation about lesbianism in the ranks. Lesbianism was not made an obvious reason for dismissal as this would draw attention to the practice, however many women were dismissed as ‘unsatisfactory, ‘unsuitable’ or with no reasons given on their records (Ford 1995b: 95). Male homosexuals were discharged on medical grounds such as ‘neuroses and psychoses’ and it is possible lesbians were dismissed in the same way. The avoidance of the topic of lesbianism is indicative of the denial in wider society; however the actions of military officers helped make lesbianism visible.

Actions to discourage suspected lesbian behaviour, or masculine behaviour, resulted in the exposure of many to the idea and contributed to lesbian identity and terminology. The military provided an opportunity for many to discover or embrace their lesbianism, find others like themselves and to strengthen their identity. As a lesbian veteran describes:

“we were sitting next to each other in the couch…and she started stoking my leg, and I thought, 'Wow! What's all this!’ And I just got terribly excited about it… Eventually we got into bed together. We never talked about it but we had a mad, mad love affair” (in Bérubé 1991: 386)

Ford (1995b: 98) argues the women’s services produced the ‘lesbian’ subject to be policed, illustrating the double operation of power as repressive and productive. The attention paid to suspected lesbian behaviour in the women’s services allowed for the formation of identity and culture despite the official position of silence on the matter. Likewise medical discourse simultaneously pathologised lesbians and through language gave them means to claim a legitimate identity.
In the late 19th century medicine replaced religion as the authority on interpreting, controlling and correcting personal behaviour (Matthews 1984: 113). The medical profession used scientific ‘knowledge’ to confirm pre-existing models of social behaviour and power that were based on Christian religious ideology. Sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and later Havelock Ellis, began to categorise and define lesbians or codify current myths about lesbian identity and practice. They classified lesbians into increasingly deviant and masculine types based on a model of gender inversion (Newton 1991: 287). Mutually exclusive categories emerged whereby heterosexuality was considered normal and healthy and anything else was perverse and deviant. Women who did not fit the masculine definition of a lesbian were thought to have been seduced by a ‘real’ lesbian and diverted from their true course of heterosexuality (Jeffreys 1985: 107). Homosexuality was eventually classified as a mental illness and women were subjected to medical incarceration where they suffered psychotherapy, psychosurgery, aversion therapy, hormone therapy and in some instances a clitoridectomy (Matthews 1984: 118). It is important not to underestimate the continuing damage caused by these discourses however it has been argued that scientific labelling enabled women to identify themselves, seek out others like them and form conscious subcultures (Vicinus 1991: 213).

Radclyffe Hall embraced the medical discourse of sexual inversion in her famous lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness, published in 1928 (Newton 1991: 282). Despite being banned under Britain’s Obscene Publications Act, this novel allowed lesbianism to truly enter public consciousness resulting in a large number of women finally being able to identify themselves. As one woman recalls “when I read The Well of Loneliness it fell upon my like a revelation. I identified with every line. I wept floods of tears over it, and it confirmed my belief in homosexuality” (in Weeks 1996: 59).

Heterosexual conservatives condemned it for defending a lesbian’s right to exist. As James Douglas, the editor of Sunday Express, states

“l would rather give… a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body but moral poison kills the soul” (in Miller 1995: 186).
Nevertheless it was embraced by Hall's generation as a means of generating an identity beyond asexual friendship models. The *Well of Loneliness* was later condemned by an increasing proportion of lesbians who rejected the notion of the gender invert claiming lesbians are ‘women identified women’ (Newton 1991: 281). Other authors, such as Virginia Wolf and Emily Dickinson, also gave lesbian desire a voice. *The Well of Loneliness*, along with medical discourse, led to the rise of the Butch-Femme subculture imitating heterosexual relationships.

Butch-femme roles helped to organise a stance in a heterosexual world and legitimise lesbian relationships in heterosexual terms (Davis and Kennedy 1991: 431). The ‘butch’ took on the male role and was presumed to be the physically active partner and the leader in sexual activity. However unlike heterosexual males the objective of the butch was to give sexual pleasure to the femme: “If I could give her sexual satisfaction to the highest, that’s what gave me satisfaction” (Davis and Kennedy 1991: 432). Since the ‘butch’ adopted an identity of a ‘real’ lesbian, articulated through medical discourse on gender inversion and mannish characteristics, consequently the femme identity was devalued, subordinate and of lower status in the community (reflecting women’s place in wider society) (Jeffreys 1989:163-166). Today butch-femme roles are criticised for adopting heterosexually defined roles but at the time they were challenging the heterocentric society in what way they could, using current discourses to justify their identity. Another visible subculture is that of ‘passing’ women.

Lesbian-like women are visible in newspapers after being exposed as ‘passing’ for men in the 19th century and before. These women dressed, worked, voted and even married; claiming the economic and political privilege of men. Cora Anderson describes the political motivation for her passing in 1914:

“Do you blame me for wanting to be a man? … In future centuries, it is probable that woman will be the owner of her own body and the custodian of her soul” (San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project 1991: 186).
Passing women are an example of women who had lesbian like traits or behaviours but not a lesbian identity. A newspaper account of ‘Bill’ a Missouri labourer typified a passing woman: “She drank, she swore, she courted girls, she worked as hard as her fellows, she fished and camped, she even chewed tobacco” (San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project 1991: 185). Faderman (in Miller 1995: 71) cites reports by Union Army doctors that approximately four hundred women, masquerading as men, fought in America’s civil war. Passing women represent a small but important part of lesbian history.

In conclusion lesbian history is difficult to research because of problems with defining a ‘lesbian’ in a time when the concept did not exist. Debate over the lesbian identity revolves around self-identification, sexual contact and proof of sexual consummation. While making lesbians visible is praiseworthy historians must not categorise too hastily but instead discover how these women conceptualised themselves. There is a lack of primary sources as many women did not keep a record of their lives, in order to avoid prejudice, and many sources have been suppressed or altered to deny the sexual orientation of the author. Silence was determined the most effective method of preventing the spread of lesbian ideas and thus lesbianism is largely absent from legal and military documents. Medical discourse made lesbians visible as ‘deviant’ subjects to reinforce heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ norm. Despite the construction of lesbians as perverse by religious, legal, military and medical discourse, labelling and surveillance allowed for the formation of a lesbian identity. Further research and theory is needed to place lesbians central to history and examine the influence of a lesbian identity and culture on wider society.
References


