

Sapphists and Sexologists;  
Histories of Sexualities



Sapphists and Sexologists  
Histories of Sexualities:  
Volume 2

Edited by

Sonja Tiernan and Mary McAuliffe

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Sonja Tiernan and Mary McAuliffe

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For everyone who has contributed to the Lesbian Lives Conference  
at University College Dublin over the last 16 years



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**Front Piece.** *Die Freundin*, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1928, *Girlfriends*: Used with permission of Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Leipzig, Germany.

## FOREWORD

SONJA TIERNAN AND MARY MCAULIFFE

This second Volume of essays, following on from *Tribades, Tommies and Transgressives; Histories of Sexualities (Vol. 1)*, was inspired by the fifteenth annual Lesbian Lives conference, “Historicising the Lesbian,” held in University College Dublin. The chapters chosen for inclusion in this volume follow the high standard of scholarship established in Volume 1 and contain an extraordinary collection which, once again, covers a wide-range of historical interests related to lesbian studies. This collection of essays has three main sections which focus on; Literature and Historical Fiction; Lesbian Activism and Lesbian Academe; as well as Music, Art and Popular Culture. This book complements and extends on the research contained in Volume 1 which includes sections focusing on; Lesbian Myths, Histories and Biographies; Radical Journals and Private Diaries; Psychoanalysis and the Medical Pathologising of the Lesbian and Female Masculinities / Femininities. In her introduction Sally R. Munt describes the Lesbian Lives experience “as a gathering, a community, a practice” that continues after four decades of lesbian activism to celebrate the sheer confidence of lesbianism, the fact that “we like being lesbians and even more strange we like being with each other, even wanting to get together to hear an old-fashioned argument.” Munt describes how the universal lesbian experience is an ambivalence towards the term “lesbian.” Sometimes it fits, at other times it constricts and inhibits – it is our badge of honour or the weight on our backs, sometime we leave it aside to be anonymous or to pass as something else. While Munt supposes that “lesbianism will last, but we do not know on what terms and especially what this means.” She suggest that “definition is perhaps the least of our concerns” and proposes instead that we explore how lesbian lives are lived and “to think about how lesbian desires might extend into our affectional lives more than first realised.” Munt also gives a tender, hilarious and thoughtful commentary on how the love of cats “might be a symptom of lesbianity.”

Following on from that section 1, *Literature and Historical Fiction* opens with an article by the celebrated novelist, playwright and literary

historian, Emma Donoghue. In this opening chapter, Donoghue discusses the complexities of writing historical fiction stating that, “when I am writing fiction, I wear my novelist’s hat, but my historian’s hat seems to sit there on top of my folders of notes, giving me the occasional warning glare.” Donoghue offers an insightful overview of what may be termed “lesbian historical fiction,” and communicates her own experience of writing in this genre; “working with the murky, often mystifying remnants of the lesbian past offers an extra frisson: like finding a human bone in one’s own flowerbed.” This unique and personal account by Donoghue provides a refreshing introduction to the literary section of this volume. Angela Donahoe continues the literary theme in Chapter Two by considering the phenomenon of contemporary Italian lesbian literature from 1980 until the present day. Donahoe notes that following the left-wing movements of the late 1960s, many Italian lesbians became involved with the broader based Homosexual and Feminist Movements that were gaining strength through the unprecedented social visibility that they were experiencing. This chapter offers the reader a unique and concise synopsis of the development of lesbian publications in Italy.

The topic of social visibility and literature continues in Chapter Three with an essay by Holly Bagget focusing on two early twentieth century lesbians who became key names in publishing during that era. Bagget examines the 1921 trial of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the involvement of two lesbians, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap. These two American editors of the avant-garde literary journal the *Little Review*, were charged with obscenity. Their only crime was the serialisation of James Joyce’s modernist masterpiece *Ulysses*. It is no surprise that the trial revealed that Americans were not ready for *Ulysses*, and it highlighted the absurdity of obscenity laws that ensnared literature instead of pornography. Bagget’s close examination tells us something new about the sexual tensions concerning lesbians at this critical historical period, and it provides a background for assessing the connection between modernism and certain esoteric schools of thought in vogue at that time.

Emma Donoghue’s literature, in particular her novel *Life Mask*, is the focus of Chapter Four. Donoghue herself describes *Life Mask* as “by far the most ambitious such project I have ever taken on . . . which began with a shred of gossip in the diary of Hester Thrale Piozzi.” In this chapter Stacia Bensyl provides an insightful reading of this novel and argues that although *Life Mask* is an historical novel which takes eighteenth century London as its setting, it also contains a cunningly subtle commentary on twenty-first century history, specifically post 9-11 rhetoric and civil liberties. In her analysis, Bensyl notes that although Donoghue’s novel

may not be a purposely written commentary on American foreign and anti-terror policy post 9-11, the setting for the novel—Britain awash in the controversy surrounding the French Revolution; the struggle between a conservative government and its liberal opposition; the political implications of gay and lesbian relationships; the issue of religious freedom as it relates to Catholic emancipation in Ireland, and the influence of the French Revolution’s tenets of fraternite, liberte, and egalite—parallels many themes and issues affecting the U.S. since the 9-11 attacks.

The final chapter in this section presents vital new information towards the history of female to male gender re-assignment, through a reading of the radical feminist journal *Urania*. Documenting the history of transsexuality is fraught with problems and primary source material is limited; there is rarely a record of people who successfully pass in their adopted gender. *Urania* provides rare documentation in this area and using the contents of the journal, Chapter Five endeavors to re-dress the historical imbalance and also includes the first full length bibliography of *Urania*, which may provide a useful reference for future researchers of the journal.

Section Two, Lesbian Activism and Lesbian Academe fittingly opens with an interview with the inspirational Joan Nestle. Katherine O’Donnell had the privilege to interview Nestle at the Lesbian Lives Conference, through a live video link. O’Donnell recorded the interview and recounts Nestle’s answers, insights and interaction with the conference audience. This chapter provides a unique and insightful glimpse into the life and work of this great figure in lesbian activism and academe. O’Donnell provides a context and overview of Nestle’s work, a person who she aptly describes as “an inspirational force for progressive change and social justice.”

Jeska Rees continues this theme in Chapter Seven, “‘Taking your Politics Seriously:’ Lesbian History and the Women’s Liberation Movement in England,” Rees discusses how lesbian women represent a considerable challenge to the English Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s. A close reading of the reactions of English feminists to a conference paper entitled “Political Lesbianism,” presented in 1979 by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, reveals that English feminism, like its American counterpart, had an uneasy relationship with lesbian feminism. In the context of subsequent lesbian and queer histories however the “Political Lesbian” paper can, perhaps, now be seen as a foundation document in the process of deconstruction of heteronormativity. Judy Rohrer links in with the topic of revolutionary activist groups in Chapter Eight as she examines the varied histories and multiple

subjectivities of activism and campaigns, in particular in relation to the campaign for gay marriage. Rohrer foresees a need for the queering of LGBT politics in order to provide the intersections of activism and ambivalences – where we can imagine a “crip/queer/colored” world with “marrying queers.”

Chapter Nine returns to the 1970s and the “safe” and “autonomous” lesbian conference spaces created in various Canadian cities during this period. In this chapter Liz Millward argues that these spaces not only mapped out the political future for lesbians organising in Canada, they also created the sense of sexual and erotic possibility which these spaces allowed the women attending, at a time when possibilities such as this were very limited. These erotic possibilities, she argues, enhance the expectations which many women brought to similar gatherings in later decades. In Chapter Ten, “Embodying Lesbian History? The shifting borders corporeal identity,” Kay Inckle reflects on the way in which the bodies of those marked sexually “other” have been integral to problematic definitions of sexual and/or gender identity. For Inckle the historical view of the role of the body in diagnosing and establishing sexual/gender identities enables the formulation of questions which are relevant to contemporary issues of identity and identity politics.

Chapter Eleven by Patricia Juliana Smith introduces the final section of this Volume on “Music, Art and Popular Culture.” In her reading of the film *The Killing of Sister George*, Smith notes that while this film has been excoriated by mainstream critics for its subject matter, it is also often rejected by queer critics for negatively stereotypical representations of lesbianism. Smith’s analysis argues that in spite of such disavowals and distancing, *The Killing of Sister George* remains an historically significant artefact of the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, inasmuch as no previous feature film had focused so exclusively on the interactions of identifiably lesbian characters or so graphically depicted a sex scene between two women—nor would many do so in the decade to come.

The subject of identity politics continues in Chapter Twelve by Bonnie Morris. In this chapter Morris identifies the importance of identity in women’s music festivals. Morris discusses how the many arguments and discussions about “women-only” space and sexual identity were part of the experience of festivals such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. As Morris suggests that archives and memories of these places and spaces are part of our history, a history we can ill afford to lose in the work of creating a full lesbian narrative.

Other histories demonstrate the difficulties faced by lesbians at an earlier time is that narrative. In “Ethel Smyth and the Emergence of the

Lesbian Composer,” Rachel Lewis considers how the reception of composer Ethel Smyth’s chamber music in the nineteenth century as “devoid of feminine charm,” “unworthy of a woman,” “unnatural,” and “overwrought,” created for Symth a history that visibly demonstrates the ways in which psychoanalytic narratives responsible for the pathologisation of the lesbian were emerging out of a much earlier discourse of sexology. In the final chapter Annamari Vänskä traces the genealogy of the current trend of lesbian (over)exposure in visual culture. Vänskä argues that it is not merely a result of capitalism’s desire to seek something new but also a result of lesbian and gay politics since the late 1960s. Vänskä shows that in contemporary culture, the previously marginalised group has taken the place of the trend-setting avant-garde. This trend, known also as the “pink pound” or “pink Euro” economy has led from dual marketing strategies to more open recognition of lesbian and gay consumers.

As in Volume 1 of this series *Tribades, Tommies and Transgressives; Histories of Sexualities* the chapter in this Volume cover a wide range of eras, ideas, debates and discussions. However the central point of all this research is the importance of scholarly and academic engagement with “our” histories; and engagement with those areas where invisibility, ignorance, and often, simple bias, exists to write the lesbian out of the narrative altogether.



## INTRODUCTION

### ON LESBIANS AND OTHER ANIMALS

SALLY R. MUNT

The Lesbian Lives conference is now the only one of its kind in the world, an event that continues to be successful and meaningful to the constituencies for which it exists, namely – lesbians. This in itself is a feat, and we might pause for a minute and consider the relative stability of that term over almost four decades, since the adrenaline rush of political activism Lesbian Liberation and then Lesbian Feminism during the 1970s. In the 1980s it felt more important, more collegiate, to qualify lesbians into hyphenated identities, yet in our fervid word-mongering we fought dearly over those hard-won multiplicities. The 1980s seemed to be much about the territorialisation of space, both material and metaphorical, having tasted an idea of presence, the promise of belonging became very seductive. Taking the 1970s and 1980s together, these decades can be rationalized as our faux-Victorian period, in which discovery of lesbian lives and cultures became paramount; having found proliferating diversity we then became intent on description, designation, organisation and classification. There was even some colonization in this fervent phase of our history, during which bisexual and transgendered people became justly cross. During the 1990s, with the consolidation of queer as a colonial adjective, verb and noun, many of us thought it regrettable that the time for lesbians had past, with the exception, perhaps, of heterosexual pornography, in which lesbianism remains a staple item on the menu. In the 1990s our activities seemed focussed more upon chasing the elusiveness of desire itself, in its many guises, theoretical and physical. Despite academic discourses organised around postmodern notions of “queer sexualities” (and how quaintly old-fashioned that “p” word feels now), lesbians did not die out, we rested, we consolidated our domestic lives, and read more and remained rudely persistent, there was even a sense of permanence about the term lesbian that didn’t yield much to semantic trends. I think that this materiality of and interest in lesbian

existence has endured, and this is what Lesbian Lives, as a gathering, a community, a practice, continues to celebrate. The sheer confidence of lesbianism, the fact that *we like being lesbians* and even more strange *we like being with each other*, even wanting to get together to have an old-fashioned argument - that is a remarkable achievement, this seems at the moment to be our twenty-first century future, at least in the shorter term.

This newfound social tolerance can extend to the highly rewarding accomplishment of being non-noteworthy as lesbians, to blend in, to have the occasional anonymity of wearing blameless beige, and embrace a suburban lifestyle as a blessed relief. To discover that we can pass or choose *not* to be political for many is a hard-won luxury. We have found a limited place of safety in the world, it is contingent on many variables being, like the stars, in momentary positive conjunction, but it is now, at least in theory, possible to be happy lesbians. It is too traditional to talk of realness here, or maybe only in an ironic and playful register. I consider myself to practice as a lesbian both authentically and inauthentically, and I suppose this to be true of those around me too; emotions and thoughts together create a cognitive framework that enables us to discover and reproduce a space in the world, a lesbian place. For many that place is agreeably conditional, for some it is a space that they have been forced into, even now. How can we not at times feel resentful about being made to fit? Regardless, lesbian is still such a tough word to deploy; I still find myself using “gay” as a euphemism with relatives, it’s a much nicer term that doesn’t so frighten the family. It remains brave to claim the word lesbian, and when I gather together with other(ed) lesbians I still experience that same thrill of the word to bind us together into a temporal community, a place to find loyalties, friends, and connect. Whilst on my own though in unlucky hetero-normative moments, I can still find it within me to pretend I have a husband at home, or an ex-husband anyway. After all this time, sometimes it is too tricky to admit to sodomitical practices. So, we each carry our own ambivalence to the term, at once it enables and disables a feeling of belonging, and estrangement.

Despite all the thousands of hours I have spent over my life contemplating what the concept of lesbianism is, the first image that pops into my mind is still of Stephen Gordon, that savagely Christ-like visualisation from Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1926). Perhaps that only says something unhealthy about me, a misspent youth, and a tendency to fall for aristocratic gamines with masochistic tendencies possibly.... I’m digressing. My actual point here is to consider why it is that in any given situation in which lesbians are rare, I welcome her potential appearance as a friend and ally. Whilst when I am plentifully surrounded by other lesbians,

I feel like I want immediately to disagree with them, I feel an argument rumbling, I want to discard ideas of “us” “the same”, and go for contradiction, difference, diversity. Hence, the Lesbian Lives conference functions like a federation; it is a utopian moment that is large enough to contain fractiousness, dissent, and downright churlish disassociation. There is another accomplishment there: to get people together to be, in effect, more lesbian than usual, and/or to relax and enjoy it and have a holiday from ourselves.

Ten years ago I went to the Lesbian Lives Conference, hosted annually by Women’s Studies, University College Dublin (UCD), in order to make a plea for more empirical research. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we seemed entranced by a Western critical theory that seemed to be self-referential and obscurantist. Many of us felt paralysed by masculinist exclusionary tactics in an academy seemingly intent on downgrading work that engaged with any assumptions about the real, truths, or material existences. We feverishly swallowed our dictionaries in order to join in on the action, many becoming swallowed up in the process, never returned. There emerged a kind of concomitant weariness with self-referentiality, and a keen desire to get outside, to get some air, to get some life, a partner, a pet. A number of us felt slightly embarrassed (the “morning after” feeling) at our rush to kiss up to the boys and began to think more carefully about what academic life might be useful for, besides employment benefits. Admittedly for many this reflection had to come *after* gaining the job security, for reasons that are entirely obvious. Being on the outside researching sexuality was so ever so briefly trendy and marketable, I think there might have been a couple of years when faculty arts appointments accrued such markers of deep trendiness, but eschewment rapidly followed, just as the new doctoral students were coming hopefully through. But the best work seems to me to be the kind of research that tries to listen rather than proscribe, that makes the effort to open up, in detailed fashion, the ruminative peculiarities of human social lives to others, so that we can continuously question our own categorical imperatives. Hence, although this word “lesbian” seems to have historical resonance, it can also mean quite imprecise and singular things too. And we need to know more about how people can and do live with that term.

To illustrate: I’m going to come over all Donna Haraway for a moment and talk about my cat. Lesbians and their cats is of course a truism of Western sexual subcultures and there must be found a place here in *Sapphists and Sexologists: Histories of Sexualities* for our furbag friends. I’m not going to dwell on dogs because I believe dogs to be a different matter entirely, in the Habermasian sense of dogs = public sphere, cats =

private sphere. Cats are acquired as an antidote to dyke drama, they are the antithesis to the risk inherent in lesbian life, they are the therapy for social antipathy and the curative for exclusion and disapproval. Cats are oblivious to your proclivities; they will resolutely stare at you whilst you are having sex, but they are simply waiting for you to finish that boring ritual so that you will pay re-attention to them. This fact is tremendously reassuring if you are a sexual deviant. Cats don't care about human social meanings, at least only as far as they impact upon their own position in the household. Cats also spend an inordinate amount of time watching you at home in your intimate spaces, they know when you haven't showered, and they know what your different coughs mean. They languidly affix their gaze on you, but to return their gaze is construed by cats as being aggressive and excessively rude. The gaze of a cat, as Jacques Derrida once described in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow)", in which he talks of appearing naked before the evaluative stare of his "little cat" is emblematic of the unfathomable gaze of the other:

Something happens there that shouldn't take place – like everything that happens in the end, a lapsus, a fall, a failure, a fault, a symptom (and *symptom*, as you know, also means "fall"... it is as if, at that instant, I had said or were going to say the forbidden, something that shouldn't be said, as if I were going to admit what cannot be admitted in a symptom and, as one says, wanted to bite my tongue.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques sees his own nakedness through the eyes of his cat, the knowledge of this nakedness is what makes him ashamed, and it is what causes Jacques to know himself. It is through the eerie gaze of this cat that he gains insight of the "absolute alterity" of the other, remarking that his own shame and self-consciousness separate and intensify these perceptions. His concomitant sensation of "falling" into the beyond induces a guilty aporia, it presages the forbidden, insinuating that that which lies shamefully outside legitimate discourse. Derrida mentions more than once in this essay that his sex is exposed, and that his cat is female. We are witnessing in this story his strange re-enactment of the Biblical Fall, a narrative that frames my present work on shame, as a foundational myth.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas Derrida conjures up the castrating, silencing force of this fall, though, my own approach to cats incorporates more optimism. I see woman/cat love as symptomatic not of Derrida's queerly shamed affect, nor perhaps of his Original Sin, but as falling within a lesbian continuum, spanning Adrienne Rich's broader affinity between women, between feminine genders, as sometime sexual and sometime companionable. The

cat languidly stretches – love taking precedence over sex. And so it is with cats. Have you tried to get erotic with your cat? It is impossible, they are not interested (unlike dogs, as we all know). Cats are only interested in each other, they are specist in their sexual orientation, and incidentally, just as likely to disinterestedly hump and lick toms as queens. (And even more likely to ignore both as erotic objects, to concentrate instead more diffusely on low intensity pleasures such as affection, warmth and food.) There are many reasons why lesbians who want to set up a home, or get over an affair, get a cat instead of another human, its an evolved decision based upon needing calmness and a steady gaze, a gaze transcendently without shame. Animal-human intimacy is teeming with affect, intense emotions that burble away in the background of consciousness. We joke with our cats, and in front of our cats, about how they are really “gay” (butch gay or femme gay), we engender them and queer them and they really don’t care. It’s such a human preoccupation.

Cats are a sensible life choice for lesbians because their intentional obliviousness provides a welcome relief from the constant social interpellation of our lives as being somehow suspicious, noteworthy, a curiosity supermarket for potentially endless comment. Regrettably, despite passing relief from such scrutiny, straight scopophilic urges seem to be never sated, and our suburban anticipation too transiently relieved. Why can’t they leave us alone? (With our cats). “Dear Newspaper Editor, I would like to patiently request that you see my lesbian life as entirely unremarkable, in fact boring, and unworthy of further column inches.” As I write this today on the morning of Tuesday June 17<sup>th</sup> 2008, I open my daily British *Guardian* to find three major articles lined up for me over breakfast: from page 3 “Gay men and heterosexual women have similarly shaped brains, research shows” by Ian Sample, the Science Correspondent (full page with sidebar and MRI picture of brain); on page 11 “Church leaders fear summer of strife over women and gay clergy” by the Religious Correspondent Riazat Butt (an unfortunate name, that), also full page with fetching picture of busty women in tasteful stained glass; and even a third of a page on page 20 “California set for summer of love as court reverses gay marriage ban” by Dan Glaister in Los Angeles. Summer of love, summer of strife – yeah yeah whatever - these straight people ask of us rather a lot. Astute readers will have noticed that the word “gay” is shorthand for gay and lesbian, because *The Guardian* is a nice paper, but extremely astute readers will go on-line to check out these articles and notice that within the text lesbians are noted rather frequently, *but the term queer is never mentioned.*

I suppose that this brings me to my main point: that despite queer's generic usefulness as a term to consolidate a political and philosophical position, at the end of the day we like to return home to our cats, reminding ourselves that we are lesbians, and that there is a gender in that as well as a sexuality. Or rather, there is the engendering: I consider my lesbian relationship with my cat to be predicated on a furry gender identification, performance, or what you will. In Derrida's terms cat-love is a symptom, and I want to suggest that it might be a symptom of lesbianity. My supposition here is that lesbianism will last, but we don't know on what terms, and exactly what this means, but that definition is perhaps the least of our concerns. It is enough to explore how we live, and how we are lived, perhaps, and to think about how lesbian desires might extend into our affectional lives more than first realised. For example, the other day someone came late into the room, interrupting a university meeting I was chairing, and I hissed at them. My habitus is becoming-cat; I am becoming a mature and eccentric lesbian. Perhaps it is just the madness of summer, this homosexual summer of strife.

*Plate 1: The Feline Chapel*



Used with permission © author

My love, my passion, for my companion Dora is deeply lesbian to me. I cannot explain this exactly but I will try. All I can say is that we rub along, as devoted familiars. Once she saved my life, and another time she saved the kitchen ceiling from crashing down by rousing my stepmother out of bed – but those are other stories. There are many mundane habits that make up our intimacy and I’m still learning about them: like how it took me sixteen years to realise that when I couldn’t sleep the reason that Dora would start this loud, exaggerated purring in the middle of the night was to try to calm my anxiety (not, in fact, to be deliberately annoying, as I had originally thought). Love takes a great deal of time to recognize, and our odd pairing requires negotiation on both sides. Her attention is very tactile and voluble, and like me she doesn’t like change. Dora is a sedentary essence, a creature comfort, a soft energy in the house – over which, and me, she is markedly territorial – she knows her place and she isn’t shifting from it. She role models “being” and “inhabitation”, which is a universal remedy for characters forced by social reproach to feel enduringly inapt.

The issue of lesbians and their cats needs a dedicated cultural historian to give it its proper due; I imagine a literary historian cat-addict is required to do a proper job of it. Within the confines of this Introduction I can only throw in a few brief pointers: stereotypes of lesbians within straight culture seem to enforce a representational mechanism of “aren’t they pitiful and misguided? They think their pets are their children!”. The global online retailer Amazon.com even has a search subcategory “Gay & Lesbian > “cat care””. This connection pertains most significantly also to our brothers, dogs and gay men; gay couples are oft represented in such mainstream television series as *Desperate Housewives* as doting deeply on their dogs. However as these shows are often written/directed/produced by rich white American gay men, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest such representations are self-referentially ironic, “in-jokes” entered deliberately for queer audiences. Pets that are presented as transitional objects for a childless person is a well-worn stereotype that implies a neurotic compensation. The politics of representation of reproduction ensures that pets are non-normative if they are owned by adults in non-nuclear units, because pets should only be purchased for and via *children*, making pet-owners without children perversely infantile themselves, not mature enough in their family ethos, locked into Freud’s “transitional phase”. These representations of fake parents often show animals being exploited or spoiled (dressing up dogs in children’s clothes, grossly fat cats fed on inappropriate diets et cetera), linking together nicely the association of homosexuality with (substitute) child abuse. These

hetero-normative assumptions are never built upon a predicate that people reluctantly have children instead of their preferred choice, pets, that is to say it is never considered that they really want pets but are forced by hegemonic expectations to have children instead. Logically their children *are* in fact their pets, their pet-substitutes if you like. Of course, those desires can exist, it is just that they are not tightly evidentiary of sexual orientation, nor is pet-owning a stage in a progressive, developmental psychic trajectory of human parenting, as so often impelled by cultural narratives.

Lesbian popular culture has certainly grasped the cat metaphor eagerly. A cursory 10-minute Google renders these typical subcultural illustrations:

I decided to get a cat. Although to be honest this was also around the same time that I came out, so maybe subconsciously wanting a cat was just part of becoming a lesbian... As far as stereotypes go, being labelled as a cat lover must be one of the preferred ones. Looking back over the years, and even today there are gay stereotypes which can cut you deep emotionally. If only everyone who feels the need to shout in the street at lesbians only used "hey you cat lover", well the world would be a better place.

[Written by Nicci Hollyhead and taken from outnorthwest 71]<sup>3</sup>

Clearly you are not a real lesbian unless you get a cat. Lesbian comic Sapna Kumar writes:

Lesbians would really be into a game of strip Scrabble®. "I just spelled "cat" and "co-dependent." That's a Double Word score. That means you strip, Lisa. Take off your cardigan and your sweater vest".<sup>4</sup>

And Kathy Belge on Lesbian Life.com observes:

1. Cats do what they want.
2. They rarely listen to you.
3. They're totally unpredictable.
4. When you want to play, they want to be alone.
5. When you want to be alone, they want to play.
6. They expect you to cater to their every whim.
7. They're moody.
8. They leave hair everywhere.

CONCLUSION: They're tiny Femme Lesbians in little fur coats.<sup>5</sup>

What I didn't say first of all is that if you enter the words cat and lesbian into Google, you get ten times as many website hits on pornography sites that proffer lesbian cat fights. Well, that's the Internet for you, (and happily it doesn't contradict my argument).

Since 1990 lesbian political activist and author Rita Mae Brown, author of classic bildungsroman *Ruby Fruit Jungle* (1973) has "co-authored" with her cat, Sneaky Pie Brown, a cozy mystery series of sixteen novels featuring the feline character Mrs. Murphy. Shortly after Rita Mae Brown's furry turn in offering the relaxing Mrs. Murphy, a cat of rather a different nature appeared in Diane DiMassa's lesbian comic series featuring her eponymous title character *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (1993-5). Hothead is a feminist anti-hero, the comic cleverly satirizes mainstream comic superheroes by returning over and over to violent revenge fantasies enacted against homophobic and heterosexist men, as the caption puts it:

Hothead Paisan, the cult-comic hero. Defender of the Stigmatized, Marginalized, and Disenfranchised. Bodyguard to the Underbelly. Avenger of All That Is Wrong.<sup>6</sup>

*Plate 2: Hothead Paisan*



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The multiple episodes are excessively, viscerally brutal, they are in antithesis to the post-modern gender fluidity emerging at that time, basically all men have penises and that makes them BAD. The men in Hothead's life are irredeemable, un-reconstructable, and morally deserving of their grisly and sadistic ends. The series is vigorously macabre; it captures well the misogynistic violence directed at the feminist and lesbian underclass, and the fearful damage that results. Hothead Paisan is a radical lesbian feminist vigilante, she spares no man, and the violence is frequently absurdist in quantity and quality – one of her comics was

banned in Canada as “hate literature”. *Hothead*’s aesthetic is pure Bataille, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker or Marquis de Sade, it is redolent of transgressive fiction, a political genre that focuses on anomie, and rebellion against social norms.<sup>7</sup> Protagonists of transgressional fiction are frequently portrayed as the excluded, the mentally ill, anti-social and nihilistic, they are habitually mutilated characters, wounded by their epoch. The genre typically deals extensively with taboo subject matters including urban violence and violence against women, drug use, and dysfunctionality. Much of this type of transgressional fiction deals with youthful searches for self-identity, inner peace and/or personal freedom, unbound by usual restrictions of taste; comic illustration, with its ability to go beyond acceptability, is hence an ideal medium for its message. *Hothead Paisan* belongs gleefully to queer gothic, or splatterpunk in its willingness to portray forbidden behaviours and shock its readers as she lurches from one brawl to another. But *Hothead Paisan* is a difficult and psychotic character, maniacally fuelled by TV and coffee, she is as much the victimized as the tormenter, and these ‘zines portray her acute, almost autistic damage from homophobia as much as they document her resistance. She is the angry lesbian wound.

*Plate 3: Hothead Paisan; Lesbian Homicidal Terrorist*



At the end of a lesbian avenging angel's day however, she must stomp home, exhausted, to her cat, and in Hothead's case this means the fez-wearing, dancing, karmic "Chicken". Chicken is the most fully-fledged lesbian cat in literature, she is the ground, the fundament, the soil of Hothead's existence. Wife, mother, friend, and naughty sibling function, the cat companion Chicken restores, nurses back to health, warns, mends, contains and nurtures her companion's fragility, she is a therapeutic atoll, a warm salve, a Pullman-like daemon to her neurotic lesbian's survival. A cat's constancy can also calm the savage beast of lesbian love, Hothead's human affairs are frequently fraught. The role of Chicken, together with Hothead's blind Buddhist friend Roz, is what gives this series profundity; as their loving relationships grow, and their little queer family is unwrapped, it contains repeatedly moving narratives of recovery from trauma. Despite the pessimistic message that makes this comic sometimes almost too painful to read<sup>8</sup>, the particular and distinctive love between Hothead and Chicken is a lesbian fantasy of cross-species intimacy that resonates across and down the years. This enchanted couple are the (f)lesbian story.<sup>9</sup>

*Plate 4: Hothead Paisan and Chicken*



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If you ask Anglo-American lesbians of a certain age if they are acquainted with *Hothead Paisan* they will sigh nostalgically for their activist youth and go “Ah, yes”. Dana Heller wrote an excellent piece at the time that situated this “urban amazon” within a folklorist tradition. She typologises *Hothead* as a lesbian feminist comic which could offer cathartic, mythological, heroic resolution to an underclass dystopia “emblematic of the intense and debilitating sense of powerlessness which almost all lesbians have experienced” (1993: 30). This tough, rangy butch is one paranoid lone avenger who organises our revenge fantasies into a “last frontier” story, always accompanied of course by her trusty sidekick Chicken. Heller describes how Chicken’s allegorical function in the comic

... is to demonstrate alternative coping mechanisms in the face of a relationship defined by an unequal distribution of power and unjust hierarchy that gives human beings – even somewhat deranged beings like Hothead – dominion over their wiser and more civilised pets”. (1993: 37)

Chicken tempers the abused dyke mindset with a reality check; she is not simply a salve/slave, she is also the functional representation of animal co-dependence and its associated ethical complications.

Returning now to the issue of the brain. As animals, our brain has a dynamic interplay with the rest of our bodies and of course our minds, thoughts, emotions and somatic impulses. From the US journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*<sup>10</sup> I learn today that my lesbian brain shape most resembles a heterosexual male’s, that these are “striking similarities” that lead me to have better spatial awareness, an excellent sense of direction but sadly impaired verbal fluency. Gay men and heterosexual women are much better at chatting, because as we know straight men and lesbians are generally narcissistic and morose. Using “positron emission tomography” (which has GOT to have something to do with the male orgasm), fellow scientists have revealed that heterosexual women and gay men have the same kind of trackable brain wiring to the amygdala, which others, such as Paul Gilbert, have explained as the “reptilian brain”<sup>11</sup>, the bit of the brain regarded as primitive, raw emotion, source of the fight or flight response. According to Ivanka Savic and Per Lindström at the Stockholm Brain Institute in Sweden, heterosexual men’s and lesbians’ wiring to our amygdala is “more physically active”. This whole field of biological research is energised by the desire to understand how and why mental disorders affect different gendered groups, why it is for example that more men/boys suffer from autism, and more women suffer from depression. Leaving aside for the moment the history of socio-biology in seeking a cure for homosexuality, or its hunt for the homosexual

“defect” in the brain, this particular finding in the *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences* has based its supposition on a research sample of a mere 90 volunteers, sorted into age and sexual orientation matched groups. The brain shape/size differentiation quoted is of the order of 2% (straight men) and 1% (lesbians), our right hand brain (our “reason”) being larger than our left. In heterosexual women and gay men, both sides of the brain (the left brain being responsible for emotion) are balanced and equal. On *The Guardian*’s handy and helpful illustration of the location of the amygdala however, heterosexual women and gay men appear to have *four* amygdalae, whilst lesbians and straight men are endowed with the minimum, i.e. one (four times the impetus to “fight or flight”). One other implication of this research is that heterosexual men and lesbians both are unbalanced. Did you follow?

In conclusion, we are animals, complex ones, and being a lesbian may or may not relate to the embodiment of emotional and physical typologies. We don’t know. Perhaps my lesbian existence is not the same as yours. The difficulty of research is that it can attribute meanings based upon very loose or tiny findings, and hence, we need to make room for small voices in our research because, really, there is so much we don’t know, and some of it we may not even want to know. As long as the Lesbian Lives Conference in UCD keeps an open and curious mindset though, we can only be grateful to the women that organize it that they give us a safe space in which we lesbians can talk freely about our lives, as they stretch out behind and before us. I refuse to trendily claim it’s a “liminal zone” though, because for many of the women that travel to Dublin (or within Dublin to UCD), it is a high spot in their Spring, and their university role is more accurately experienced as detached, provisional and transient. Lesbian Lives is a most precious resource; it can provide us with a consistent space of belonging within an academy that is too often littered with snares. To provide a place in which we can squabble about our affairs, talk about what makes us tick, go off on ridiculous tangents, entertain ephemera, revere our elders, bring out all our leathery old baggage and return with it, bursting its stitches, to our small, bent, (and possibly furry) corner of the earth.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Derrida, Jacques (2002) "The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow)" Trans. David Wills in *Critical Inquiry* 28:2, 369-418 (p.373).

<sup>2</sup> Munt, Sally R. (2007/8) *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*. Burlington VT & London: Ashgate.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lgf.org.uk/news/outnorthwest/opinion/just-another-crazy-cat-loving-lesbian/> Accessed Tuesday June 17<sup>th</sup> 2008.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.afterellen.com/people/2007/9/lesbiancomics?page=0%2C2> Accessed Tuesday June 17<sup>th</sup> 2008.

<sup>5</sup> <http://lesbianlife.about.com/od/just4fun/a/DogsandCats.htm> Accessed Tuesday June 17<sup>th</sup> 2008.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hotheadpaisan.com/index.html> Accessed 27 June 2008.

See further: Heller, Dana A. "Hothead Paisan: Clearing a Space for Lesbian Feminist Folklore." *Folklore* 19:1-2 (1993): 27-44., Muscio, Inga. Review of *The Complete Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* by Diane Dimassa. *Lambda Book Report* 7:2 (1999): 20-22., Scalettar, Liana. "Resistance, Representation, and the Subject of Violence." *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*. Joseph Boone et al., eds. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. 261-277.

Sloniowski, Lisa. "She Was Framed: An Analysis of Hothead Paisan." *Siren* (April-May 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See further Haggerty, George *Queer Gothic* Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2006. Also the rather as yet unformed

<http://www.transgressionalfiction.com/transgressionalfiction.htm>

<sup>8</sup> In one episode the term "borderline" is used, as in "Borderline Personality Disorder". Clinically the character of Hothead is a piquant rendition of someone suffering from BPD. People with Borderline Personality Disorder experience such violent and frightening mood swings that they often fear for their sanity. They can be euphoric one moment, despairing and depressed the next. The following is the criteria listed in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Disorders, Fourth Edition [DSM IV] (1994) for Borderline Personality Disorder:

A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity.

The "Borderline Era": Kriesman & Straus have argued that just as the hysterical neurotic of Freud's time represented the repressive European culture of the early twentieth century, the borderline's fragmented sense of identity and difficulty in maintaining stable relationships may reflect the fragmented, postmodern self/culture that characterises our own era. (Kriesman & Straus, "I Hate You - Don't Leave Me", 1989). How noteworthy to suggest that the brutal effects of misogyny and homophobia create "borderline" (lesbian) subjects, in both senses of the word.

<sup>9</sup> B.J. Wray, writing in Claude J. Summers (ed.) *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* puts an end to the idea that North American capitalism doesn't get irony: