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# FUSE

MAGAZINE

MOTHER JONES, LEWIS HINE & THE MARCH OF THE MILL CHILDREN  
Gay Bell on Jude Binder's *Broken Bough*

THE NEW JERUSALEM in two and a half minutes  
by Marlene Nourbese Philip

SUNIL GUPTA  
Artist's Project

Kodak Girls

BY RENATE WICKENS-FELDMAN

# Sapphic Scenes



Looking Through a History

by Cyndra MacDowall



# Sapphic scenes

## LOOKING THROUGH A HISTORY

by *Cyndra MacDowall*

This historical overview of the representation of lesbian sexuality and identity has been underway for the past eight years. I began my research in 1983 with a desire to find an art and cultural history of lesbians and lesbian representation, and the hope that I would find a "lost" history of lesbian visual self-representation. I also wanted to explore the specific stereotypes of lesbianism in mainstream society, how these stereotypes appeared, and to understand and disassemble the homophobic ideas contained within them. Having been denied a history I felt compelled to constantly invent myself out of homophobic misinformation and without knowledge of the lives of other lesbians.<sup>1</sup>

While most of lesbian history is invisible, lesbians are most notably visible in patriarchal, heterosexist culture for our sexual difference and for the frequent representation of lesbian sexual activity in sexual imagery. In seeking visual representations of lesbians, the most readily available imagery was sexual imagery.

My concentration in this research has been on photographic images, although I have also included some paintings and drawings, where appropriate. The work is limited to primarily American and white subjects. In future research I would like to expand upon information about lesbians of colour and give this work a broader, more comprehensive, international scope. I would welcome any contributions that may be offered.

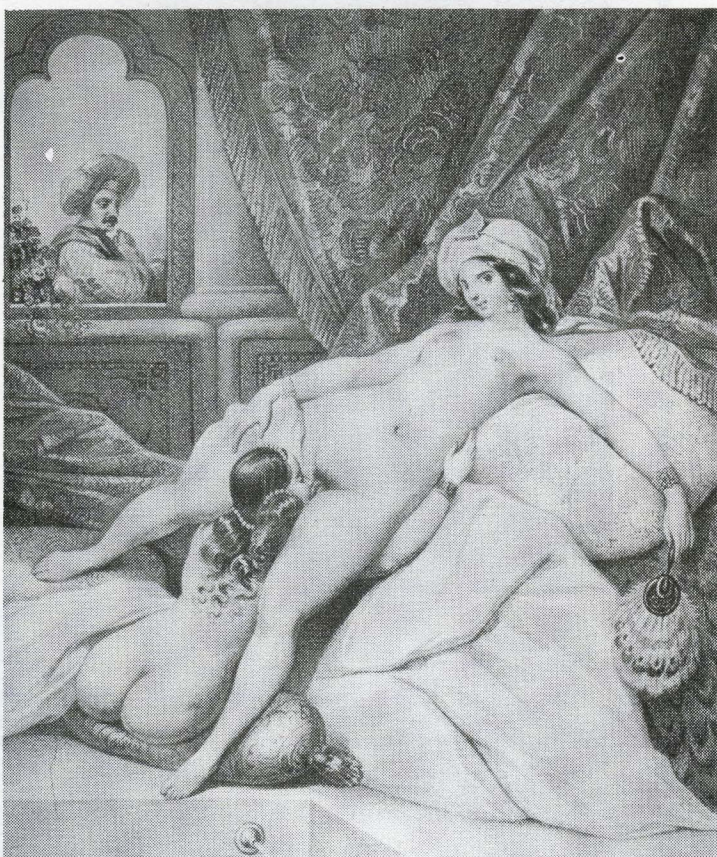
BERENICE ABBOTT, PORTRAIT OF JANE HEAP (PARIS 1925-1929)



In undertaking my research I asked a number of questions about the images I was examining: Who made these images? What was their purpose? Who was the intended audience for the work? How did the images reach their audience? Where any of the artists female? Who were the models? What kind of relationship (between the subjects if more than one, and between the subjects and the artist) is indicated in the image? Perhaps most importantly, what was the social context for these images? and, what do these images reveal about social attitudes toward lesbians and individual lesbian lives?



**GUSTAVE COURBET**  
**THE SLEEP, 1866.**



**ACHILLE DEVERIA**  
**THE HAREM c.1850s**  
**(male voyeur in window).**

THE VAST MAJORITY OF IMAGES OF LESBIANS and lesbian sexuality have been produced by and for the pleasure of heterosexual men. Two questions naturally arise: Why would men choose so frequently to include or suggest some form of lesbian sexual interaction? And, what are the specific forms of lesbian representation produced by and for men?

The appearance of two women being sexually active has an apparently broad and enduringly popular appeal for men. While there is much room for speculation, one factor is that depictions of lesbian sex can show sexual *interaction*, without the potentially obtrusive or threatening image of another man. In the western tradition of the sexual image of the receptive, inviting female nude, both women and men are trained to find women's bodies attractive and sensual, and both women and men are likely to respond to suggested lesbian scenarios. The presentation of two inviting women provides an additional female body for the (male) viewer. In addition, specific concerns about, and legal restrictions on, images of the penis in patriarchal society have been a factor, making lesbian scenarios a more acceptable way to imply more explicit sexual interaction.

Consistent themes in lesbian representations are the male voyeur observing lesbians, lesbians made further exotic by their depiction in a harem, or the lesbian sexual acts taking place within other exclusively female environments. The absence of men is considered to be the primary reason that women turn to each other for sexual gratification. This mythology persists in the stereotypes of lesbians in prisons and the armed forces. Although lesbians have certainly existed in both these environments,

scrutiny by male authorities has made these environments more consistently documented than other locations of lesbian existence.

While butch-femme role representations frequently appear within lesbian-made imagery and documentary images of lesbians, they rarely appear in male-produced material. When they do, these roles are frequently depicted as perverse.

WHILE LITERATURE HAS A LONG TRADITION of stories written by lesbians with lesbian characters, there is very little lesbian self-representation in the visual arts. Visual representation has been limited by costs of both time and production; in general, the greater the expense to produce and distribute the medium, the less often self-representations of “minority” voices are found. In photography the issue of identification of subjects and the potential dangers this could pose for the models has also served as an obstacle. (The theme of anonymity frequently appears in the images themselves.) In addition, literature and its consumption is regarded as a more “private” act than the public nature of visual presentations. The traditional good girl/bad girl dichotomy related to public sexual identity has also had an impact on women’s ability to produce and view visual sexual material.<sup>2</sup>

## *Victorian Intimacy*

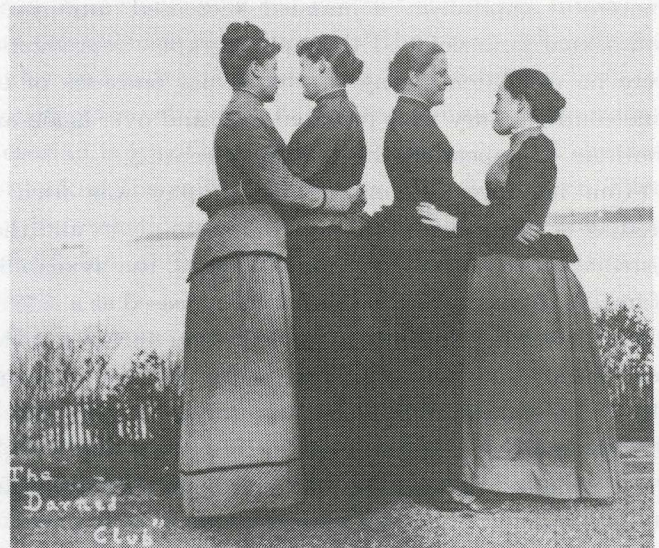
The nineteenth century saw an enormous outpouring of sexual material in the form of books, memoirs, illustrations, photographs, bawdy stories, songs, and the birth of the new industry of pornography. During this period many sexual fantasies still operative today were established and promulgated: lesbian scenarios, cross-class sex, the virgin, flagellation, fetishes (fur, leather, shoes, boots), etc.

This was a period of enormous turmoil and change. A particularly significant change for women was the development of a widespread system of wage labour. Although women’s labour was defined as worth less than men’s,<sup>3</sup> it allowed working-class women some degree of freedom to choose to live outside the family and independent of men. Consequently, working-class women could choose both to be lesbians and to live as lesbians.

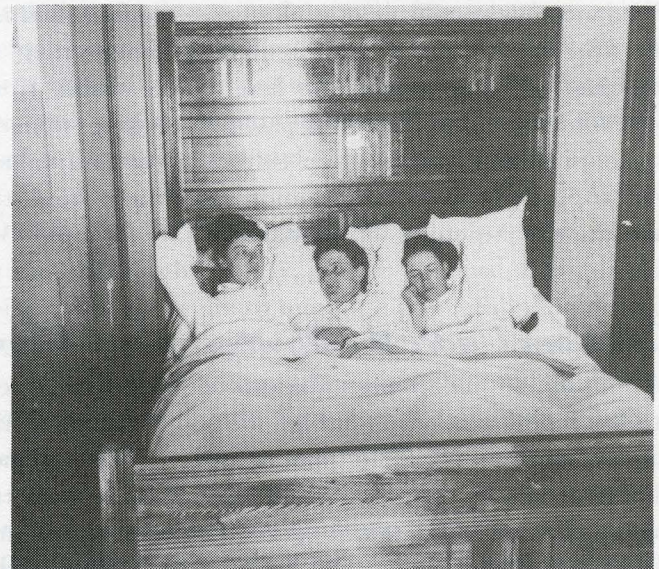
Among middle-class women, the practice of “romantic friendship”—in which women, both married and unmarried, established primary intimate long-term relationships with other women—was accepted and encouraged. These relationships were seen to occupy a place of spiritual bonding and may or may not have had a genital sexual component.<sup>4</sup>



DAGUERROTYPE, (Anon.) 1850.



ALICE AUSTIN  
THE DARNED CLUB  
OCTOBER 29, 1891.



ALICE AUSTIN  
MRS. SNIVELY, JULIE AND I IN BED  
AUGUST 29, 1890.

The photographs of Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865) display many characteristics of Victorian photography and romantic friendship, and are unusual in the intimate eye and physical contact between the women. Hawarden's images frequently include mirrors—the reflection of one individual woman, or two women in the mirror. There are also many images containing very sexually suggestive vulva shapes in the skirts of these women. While the intimate physical contact between women in these images suggests lesbian interaction, very little is known about Hawarden's personal life

THE PRIMARY EVIDENCE STILL AVAILABLE of nineteenth century sexual practice and fantasy are those works that were made in some kind of multiple. Successful capitalism demanded increased uniformity, and sexual fantasies and their photographic reproduction were no exception. Many of the sexual fantasies of the nineteenth century were repeated over and over again and continue to appear in the twentieth century

From its very beginning, photography was used to produce sexual images. Through duplicate prints and their distribution to the emerging middle class, the availability of images of sex and sexual scenarios increased as a sideline to the enormous business of prostitution thriving in the new urban centres. Within nineteenth century pornography, representations of lesbian scenarios became one of the common themes in male heterosexual material, a theme that continues today. In fact, it is a genre in and of itself.<sup>5</sup>

Two main themes of lesbian sexuality and homophobia were established and propagated: lesbian sex as accessible and inviting to male participants; and the narcissistic evil and dangerous perversity of exclusive lesbian sex. Lesbian practice was tolerated and frequently represented, as stimulus and entertainment for heterosexual males. However, for a woman to take this practice seriously, to make it exclusive, and even develop cultural ideas and values, was to prompt restrictions and retribution from the institutional structures of patriarchy.<sup>6</sup>

### *Out from Under the Photographer's Cape*

In contrast to male representations of lesbian sex, there are few representations of lesbian life and sexuality as the subject matter of lesbian photographers.<sup>7</sup> Most women photographers at the turn of the century came from the middle class and maintained connections with their families as a source of support for their work.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, those who did have lesbian relationships often adopted a



CLEMENTINA HAWARDEN  
UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPH (active 1845-65).



THE MASCOT (cover)  
NEW ORLEANS NEWSPAPER, 1893.



FRANCES BENJAMIN-JOHNSTON  
SELF PORTRAIT (c. 1890).



SIR JOHN LINDSAY  
LE SABATT (engraving), 1898.

practice of strict privacy around their personal lives; frequently their live-in relationships with other women did not take place until after the death of their parents.

Two such women were Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) and Alice Austen (1866-1952). Johnston was very active around the turn of the century as a professional photographer, a writer who encouraged other women to become photographers, and a promoter and supporter of her contemporaries. Her work included society portraits, documentation of women workers and Black educational institutions, journalism, and architectural photography. Extremely reticent about her personal life, Johnston established at least one lengthy partnership with a woman, there are no indications of men having been similarly attached to her.

Johnston's engaging self-portrait shows her rebelliousness towards the conventions of the times—showing her ankles and petticoats, smoking, and drinking beer (although other self-portraits portray her as a conventional Victorian lady). This portrait is curious in that she does not look at the camera or engage with the viewer. There is a journalistic, observer sense to this image that may indicate an ambivalence about this representation of herself.

Alice Austen produced an enormous body of work documenting the life of her circle of friends—many of whom appear to be lesbian couples—in Staten Island where she lived for most of her life. She herself maintained a 50-year relationship with her “friend” Gertrude Tate.<sup>9</sup> Austen's work is an intriguing document of middle-class life. Her images include playful humour, frequent representations of cross dressing, and a relaxed female physical intimacy between women that is rarely seen in images of the period. Austen was a passionate amateur; her subjects were her friend, and there is no evidence that she showed these images outside her community. Her freedom from economic and artistic ambitions appears to have contributed to the relaxation and ease of her subjects.

### *From Sin to Sickness*<sup>10</sup>

In the nineteenth century, science assumed a new role of defining and determining morality, previously a function of the church alone. By the late 1900s, the new sciences of psychology and sexology were established and along with these, the concept of the “pathology” of women's sexuality. Male writers were fascinated by lesbianism which they saw as a part of the “puzzle” of women's sexual nature, a controversy that raged in scientific writings.

By the turn of the century, lesbian sex (along with male homosexuality) was defined as a perversion and a disease,<sup>11</sup> and frequently appeared as a form of evil in *fin de*





*siècle* art The new image of the lesbian shifted to a narcissistic eroticism that excluded men.

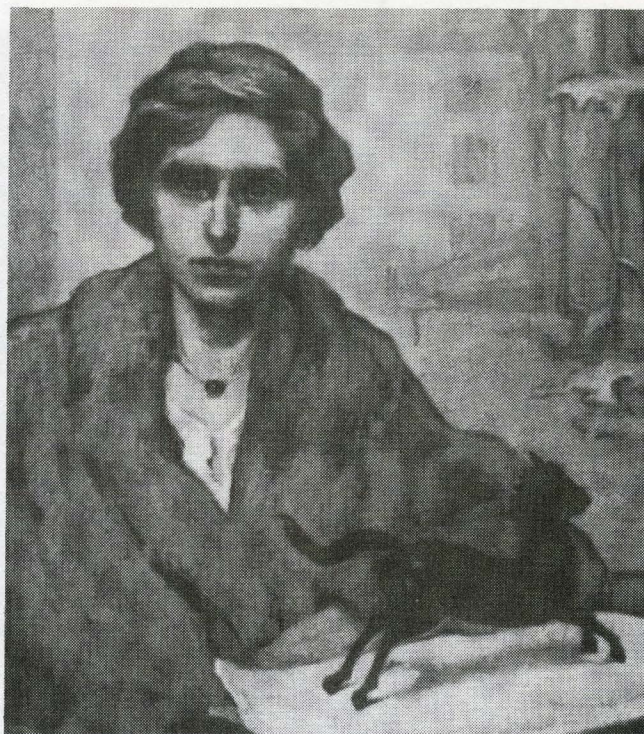
The degeneration of society through the sexual degeneration of women appears in various images and stories produced by intellectual male artists and writers. Male doctors and sexologists, such as Freud, Ellis, Kraft-Ebbing, and others, debated the effectiveness of psychotherapy to cure homosexuals of their "illness" and developed theories about the causes of this newly-defined illness. Books written by lesbians, such as *The Well of Loneliness* (Radclyffe Hall, 1928), appeared in the early part of the 20th century as an apology and plea for tolerance for the unfortunate victims of homosexuality who were trying to lead their lives with this unfortunate illness.

### ***A Social Life: Salons, Bars, and the Blues***

During the teens, twenties, and thirties, women enjoyed new freedoms, and there is evidence of large and visible communities of lesbians living in Paris, Berlin, and New York. Much has been written about the lesbian literary salons of Natalie Barney and Gertrude Stein in Paris and the various lesbian couples associated with these women.<sup>12</sup> Many of these women were ex-patriots from the U.S. and Britain. The freedoms they enjoyed were the result of their economic independence through inheritance, accompanied by their determination to live their lives as they chose. From this period emerges a new stereotype and role model for lesbians: the cultured, educated, wealthy lesbian who writes and participates in the development of the cultural life of the modern world. These women often exhibit butch-femme role structures in their relationships and in their appearance in the portraits that are available.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the strongest and most available portraits of lesbians are those made by Berenice Abbott in Paris between 1924 and 1929. It is interesting that all her portraits are of individuals—none of the couples are portrayed together in her photographs. In addition, none of the books of Abbott's work have identified these couples as such. Very little information is available about Abbott's own personal relationships. Nonetheless, the directness of the relationship between these lesbians and the photographer is strikingly unusual by comparison to other photographs we have of these women. These images have none of the flattery and forced feminization of conventional portraits of women of this era.

It is from this period that we have the first documentary photographs of lesbians and lesbian life. Brassai's images



ROMAINE BROOKS  
PORTRAIT OF NATALIE BARNEY (c.1920).



BERENICE ABBOTT, PORTRAIT OF DJUNA BARNES, 1925-29 PARIS.

BRASSAI, LE MONOCLE, THE BAR. (c.1932) FROM THE SECRET LIFE OF PARIS OF THE 30s.



BRASSAI  
A COUPLE AT LE MONOCLE (c.1932).

of working-class lesbians in Parisian bars and gay and lesbian dances stand out as documents of everyday lesbian social life. Brassai's role as an outsider is reflected in the images: none of these lesbians directly engage with him. His descriptions of the "butch" lesbians,<sup>14</sup> whom he finds especially disturbing and fascinating, reveal his obvious alienation. This fascination is demonstrated by his concentration on portraits of butch lesbians and butch-femme interaction. The location of the camera looking down on the subjects also lends a curious sense to these images. While it may have been simply a pragmatic choice (to keep the camera out of the way), this angle of view, accompanied by Brassai's terse titles for the photographs, heightens the sense of a superior observation of "underground" activity.

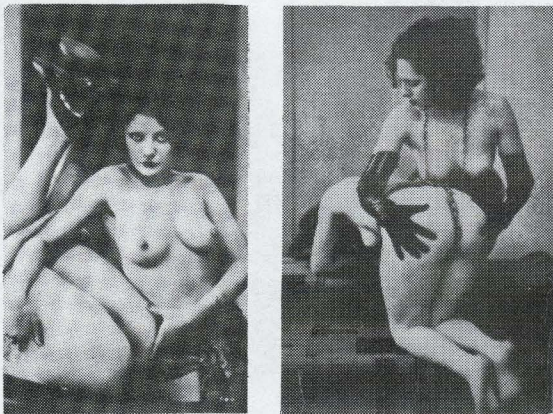
In the twenties and early thirties (until Hitler took power in 1933), Berlin was a vibrant centre of gay and lesbian life. There were numerous lesbian bars and social clubs, and many periodicals, plays, and films produced by lesbians and feminists. There were also political organizations actively working to establish legislative equality for gays and lesbians, some of which centred around Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science.<sup>15</sup>

While there is extensive documentation of the social organizations of lesbians in New York,<sup>16</sup> some of the least known lesbian lives of the twenties and thirties are those of Black lesbians in Harlem. Recent research in Black history and especially on Black women jazz and blues singers has revealed the lesbian sexual relationships of many mothers of the blues including "Ma" Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Bessie Smith, and Gladys Bentley. Lesbian relationships amongst these women are often difficult to determine because many also had liaisons with men and sometimes married them. The unfortunate reality is that marriage to a man has been documented historically as the most significant relationship in a woman's life, unless considerable evidence to the contrary exists. Sometimes this evidence is not recorded and simply exists in the personal papers and memories of those individuals and their friends and lovers.

Evidence of lesbian sexual practice can be seen in the lyrics of their songs. "Ma" Rainey sings in her "Prove it on Me Blues":

Went out last night, had a great big fight,  
Everything seemed to go on wrong;  
I looked up, to my surprise,  
The gal I was with was gone.

Where she went, I don't know,  
I mean to follow everywhere she goes,  
Folks say I'm crooked, I didn't know where she took it,  
I want the whole world to know.



ANON. (c.1930 France).



PROMOTIONAL AD FOR MA RAINEY'S  
 "PROVE IT ON ME BLUES"  
 A PARAMOUNT RACE RECORD, 1928.



BESSIE SMITH  
 (c.1930).



ANON. (c.1930 France).

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,  
 Sure got to prove it on me;  
 Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
 They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.<sup>17</sup>

The promotional material for the recording of this song portrays Rainey dressed in a jacket, vest, tie, and hat talking to two women. The obvious coding of "butch" attire is international. The lyrics of this song reveal a central ambivalence of lesbian life. Rainey wants to declare her love and devotion ("I want the whole world to know") while the chorus of the song ("prove it on me") states that her lesbianism can't be proven by those who would seek to prohibit it.

In "It's Dirty But Good" (1930), Bessie Smith's lyrics show a cheeky, lusty sexual appetite appreciative of lesbian sex, but recognizing social censure for this "dirty" form of behaviour:

I know women that don't like men  
 The way they do is a crying sin.  
 It's dirty but good, oh, yes, it's dirty but good.  
 There ain't much difference, it's just dirty but good.

Gladys Bentley, another singer in Harlem, was unusual in that she lived an exclusively lesbian life during this period and found a community of acceptance and economic support.<sup>18</sup> Tolerance for lesbians and gay men seems to have been common in Harlem during the twenties and thirties.

DURING THE THIRTIES, MALE-PRODUCED sexual images often include representations of lesbians and suggestions of lesbian interaction. Although unusual, butch-femme suggestions are occasional evident in this material.

This image, [left] made in Paris around 1930 by an anonymous, probably male, photographer, reveals an unusual pleasure and complicity between the two models and between the models and the photographer. Their direct eye contact, use of butch-femme signifiers, and humour transcend the usual representations of lesbian sex during this period.

BY THE 1940S, THE POPULARIZATION OF IDEAS initiated by the sexologists was fairly complete and sex was seen to be a primary motivating force in individual lives. The development of a modern gay and lesbian society is tied to the changes and opportunities that grew out of World War II. During the war there was an unusual tolerance for gays and lesbians, both in the armed forces and on the homefront. After the war and during the cold war period, however, there was greatly increased repression and persecution.



## *The Archetypical Triangle: Seduction, Perversion, and Domination*

A variety of archetypical themes of the lesbian become more evident during this period. In the classic lesbian love triangle, the older "confirmed" lesbian struggles to gain the affections of the younger "convertible" woman and take her away from a man. Often the "confirmed" lesbian must die to resolve the struggle. This theme appears time and again in both high art (e.g., D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox*) and in lesbian pulp.<sup>21</sup> Variations on this theme involve the older woman as a schoolmistress who seduces and controls her young students. The conception of older lesbians having a relationship of power and domination over their younger partners is a frequently repeated theme.

An extension of this theme is the lesbian/bisexual vampire, who sucks the lifeblood from innocent men and women. She is compelling attractive, dangerous, and highly sexually charged, and of course, converts her victims to her perversion. The earliest appearance of the clearly lesbian vampire is in literature from the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup> The endurance of this theme is evidenced by the lavish production of the film *The Hunger* in 1982.

A related theme was the emptiness, sterility, and loneliness of lesbian life with the assumption that non-reproductive sex prohibited lesbians from family relationships—the centre of heterosexuality. This appears time and again, in classics such as *The Well of Loneliness* and in pulp.

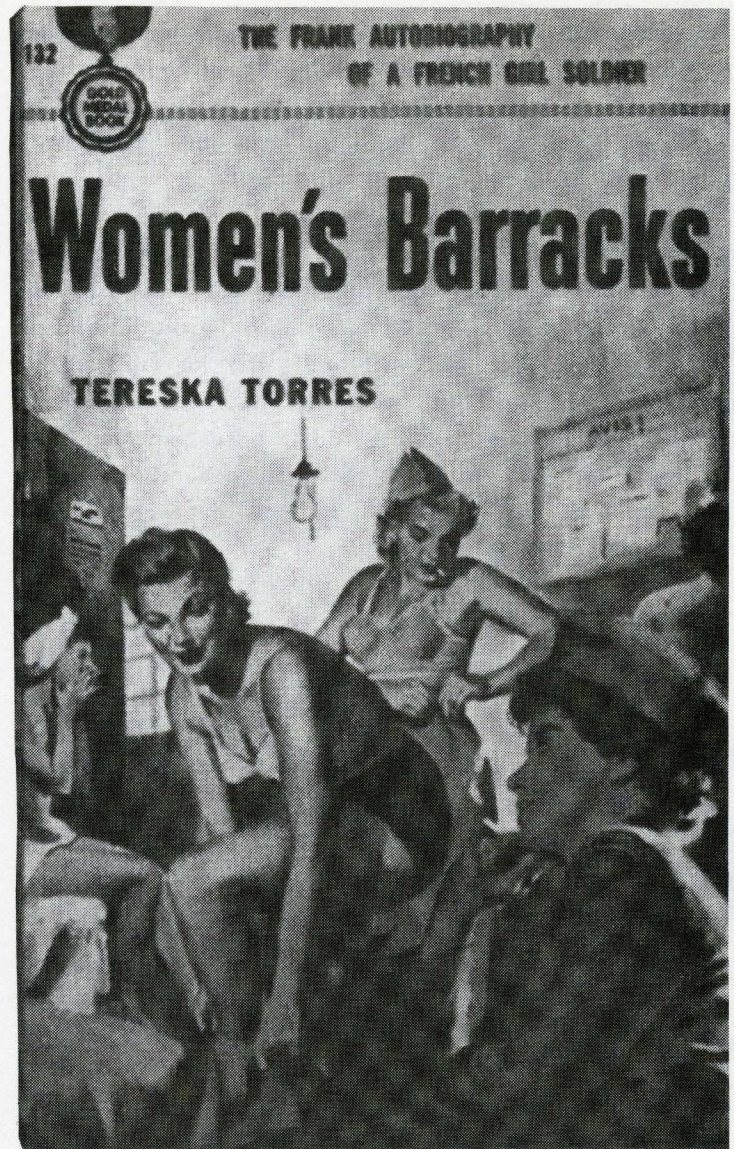
## *Lesbian Pulp Explosion*

From the 1940s to the 1970s, thousands of novels with lesbian themes were published by the new paperback publishing houses. Widely available and frequently reprinted to meet the demand of a large readership, these novels were written by both women and men, and it seems likely that both men and women read them.<sup>23</sup>

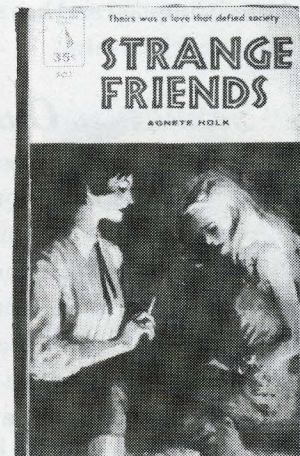
These books reveal the anxieties of the era about the existence of lesbians and the anxieties of lesbians about life in an intolerant society. The more serious of these books are often introduced by a medical doctor who makes a plea for tolerance and understanding. Unapologetic stories with attractive lesbian characters and happy endings were usually altered by the publishers to create an unhappy and therefore morally acceptable ending.

Lesbian pulp novels hold an ambivalent place for lesbians. While they provide some indication of working-class lesbian life and occasionally sympathetically examined the process of "coming out," lesbian life was depicted as fundamentally tragic.

The images on the covers of these novels were commissioned from male commercial artists specifically for the pulp



1950's PULP PAPERBACK COVER  
WOMEN'S BARRACKS BY TERESKA TORRES.



STRANGE PULP PAPERBACK COVERS.

novel market. As the novels were reprinted new covers were produced in the style of each decade. The earlier covers were usually reproduced from paintings. They reveal some stereotypical ideas that were contained in the contents of the books.

While some covers portray a lonely individual woman (lesbian) questioning her future, usually there are two women depicted, generally a blonde and a brunette. One is younger, usually seated in the foreground, and is preoccupied with herself or looks off to the outer world; the older, slightly more masculine-looking woman stands behind or over the younger one in a predatory way. The women are usually disconnected—they rarely make eye contact or show equal interest. (An exception is the 1950s cover of *Women's Barracks*.<sup>24</sup>)

### *High Art Kinkiness*

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, contrasting images of the lesbian were propounded by art photographers Helmut Newton and David Hamilton. In true '60s fashion, they picked up on the classic themes of lesbian sexuality and homophobia originally seen at the turn of the century. Both produced highly successful photo books that moved in the popular art press. Newton picked up the idea of lesbian evil and created a world of lesbian high-fashion kinkiness. The viewer, in the position of a voyeur, observes the closed, very mannered, opulent world of mannikin-like lesbians coolly interacting. His work includes the books *World without Men*, *White Women*, and *Sleepless Nights*, as well as photographs for fashion magazines.

By contrast, David Hamilton produced several books and a film *Bilitis* (c. 1975), all of which repetitiously portray young girls in private girls' schools exploring sexuality with each other in the absence of men. These adolescent girls provocatively lounge around naked or semi-naked in pairs, sometimes touching or kissing each other. The sexuality here is primarily implied and has some allusions to earlier images of romantic friendship.

### *Our Sexuality, Ourselves*

The social changes and "sexual revolution" of the 1970s and the rise of feminism (originally the Women's Sexual Liberation Movement) brought new sexual freedoms for women. Lesbians initially held an ambivalent place in the feminist movement, as feminists were afraid of making lesbian demands part of the general platform of women's equality. However, the rise of feminism and particularly, lesbian-feminism created new networks for the production and distribution of information and images of women and lesbians. Feminist concerns about the representation of



HELMUT NEWTON  
INTERIOR (c. 1970s).



J.E.B. (JOAN E. BIREN)  
PAGAN & KADY, 1978.  
FROM EYE TO EYE, PORTRAITS OF LESBIANS.

women prompted re-examinations of images of women and support for the creation of new ones.

One response to this call for new images of lesbians was the portraits produced by J.E.B. (Joan E. Biren), published in her book *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (1979). This book is still important in its presentation of a wide range of individual lesbians of varying ages, races, classes, and abilities involved in activities such as work, rituals, political actions, etc.

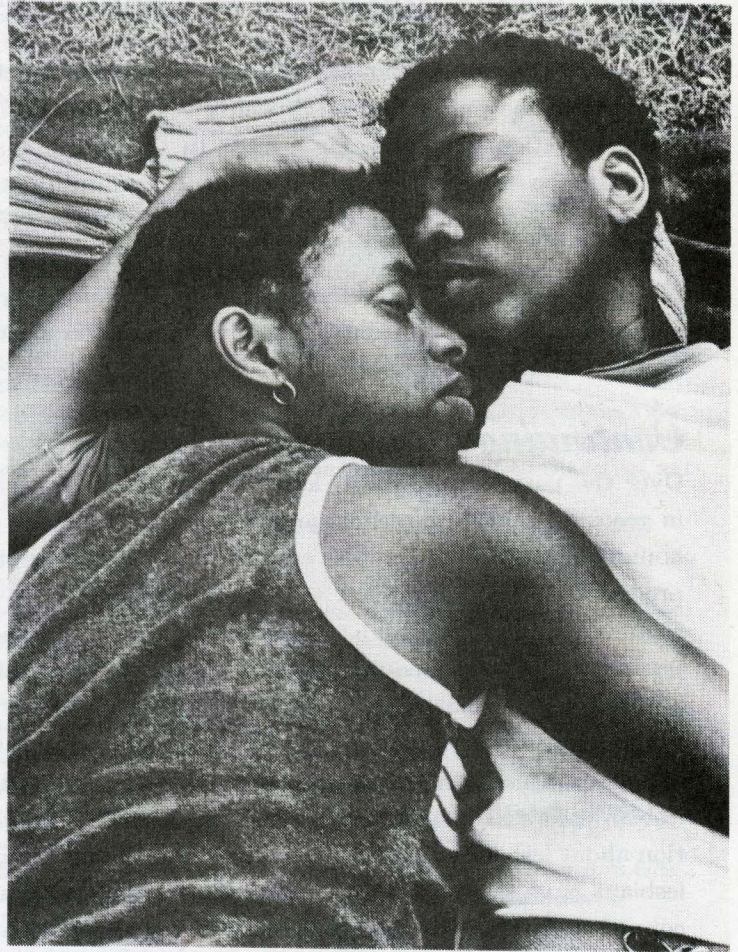
An unleashing of information about sex accompanied the sexual revolution. Initially, a large quantity of sex manuals intended for a popular audience were written by doctors (e.g., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*). The feminist health movement strove to reclaim women's health and sexuality away from the experts and back into the hands of individual women. This was accompanied by the production of many women's health manuals, the best known being *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (initially published in 1971), which includes a section on sexuality and lesbian sexuality. Throughout the 1970s, there were numerous lesbian self-help sex manuals produced by and for lesbians and distributed through the women's bookstore network. They often included drawings of lesbians by lesbians, with vulvas being a predominant theme. Both the books and their images are characterized by a jubilant energy and breathless discovery of lesbian sexuality.

In an attempt to counteract popular ideas of abnormality and deviance, sexuality was portrayed as "natural" and there was an enormous proliferation of images of women in nature and sex in nature. Some early explorers of lesbian "erotica" are Tee Corinne, Honey Lee Cottrell, Cynthia McAdams, and Kate Millet.

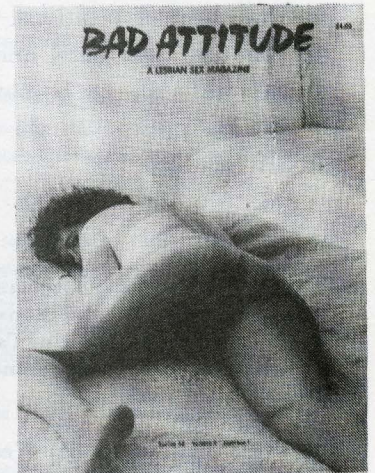
## *The Controversy of Power*

Passionate feminist debates over pornography and censorship, and new theories about the construction of desire, prompted new images and explorations of women's sexuality in the 1980s. Lesbian explorations included images and raging debates over lesbian sadomasochism, fantasy, gender play, the return of dildos (which had been banished as unnatural and patriarchal in the '70s), and other sex toys and equipment.

In 1984, two lesbian-produced sex magazines appeared, almost simultaneously: *On Our Backs* from San Francisco, billed as "entertainment for the adventurous lesbian," and *Bad Attitude* from Boston. These magazines were greeted with much controversy, in part for their alignment with sex trade workers, inclusion of SM imagery,



J.E.B. (JOAN E. BIREN)  
PRISCILLA & REGINA, 1979.  
FROM EYE TO EYE, PORTRAITS OF LESBIANS.



ON OUR BACKS 1985 & BAD ATTITUDE 1988  
MAGAZINE COVERS.

and their adoption of an aggressive stance as sexual consumers. *On Our Backs* was alleged to be racist by the Toronto Women's Bookstore staff (among others), who refused to sell either magazine.

Later in the '80s, lesbian sex videotape companies in the U.S. began the production of explicitly sexual videos and the exploration of lesbian fantasies.<sup>25</sup> In Canada, lesbian artists have explored sexual imagery in group photographic projects, such as *Drawing the Line* (Vancouver) and *Bed of Roses* (Toronto), and as individual photographers, video artists, and filmmakers.<sup>26</sup> In Britain, *Quim* magazine began publication in the late '80s and is a part of the continuing exploration of lesbian sexual imagery

### *Continuing Fluid Explorations*

Over the past twenty years, lesbians have been involved in recovering history, understanding how the heritage of homophobia impacts on our culture, and beginning the process of self-definition and self-representation. We have established ourselves as a strong political force within feminism, but the requirement to challenge persistent homophobic mythology is an everyday reality.

The AIDS crisis has prompted discussion on the variety and plurality of lesbian sex. To date, there is very little lesbian safe sex imagery and very little definite information about lesbian vulnerability to HIV. For the most part lesbians have seen AIDS as a crisis affecting the gay male community. But, increasing concern about lesbian safe sex is provoking discussion of sex toys, specific lesbian sexual practices, and an expanded definition of what constitutes lesbian sex and identification as a lesbian. This will likely be reflected in lesbian sexual images of the '90s.

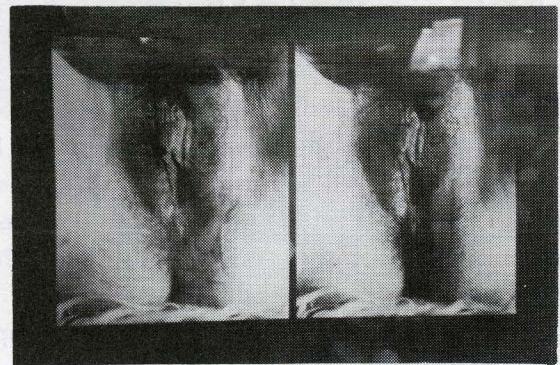
The controversies surrounding lesbian sexual exploration appear to have diminished, in part by a seeming solidification of positions. However, in order for lesbians to produce, distribute, and consume sexually stimulating visual material—to be sexually present and not simply politically present in the world—we must claim *public* sexual space.

**Cyndra MacDowall is a lesbian artist and photographer. Her work has appeared in the exhibitions *Sight Specific* and *Bed of Roses*. *Bed of Roses* is currently touring Canada (1991/92). Evolving versions of this paper have been presented in Canada and the U.S. as a slide lecture since 1983.**

I would like to thank Wesley Stevens for his editing and organizational assistance, and Lynn Fernie for providing information on lesbian blues singers. Financial contributions towards this research have been received from the Lesbian & Gay Community Appeal of Toronto, the Canada Council Explorations Program, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.



TERI AND CAERAGE, LESBIAN SEX ACTORS, BLUSH PRODUCTIONS.  
PHOTO: DAWN LEWIS.



KATE MILLET  
LESBIAN EROTICA, 1975.





TEE CORINNE, UNTITLED PHOTOMONTAGE  
FROM *A WOMAN'S TOUCH*, 1978.

## ENDNOTES

1 Note on Sources: Information about lesbian identity and sexuality is difficult to obtain, as many lesbians have tried to keep their sexual practice quiet and private. (In many instances, executors have prohibited feminists and lesbians from access to documents that might shed light on the private lives of lesbians and women whom we believe to have had lesbian experiences. Examples are Clementina Hawarden, Charlotte Whiten, and Eleanor Roosevelt. In some instances families have destroyed correspondence and other "evidence" that might confirm lesbian relationships.) I have undertaken research in public libraries, art gallery collections, archives, sex shops, and the private collections of many individuals who have lent me books from their personal libraries. I have also sought assistance from private collectors and dealers in erotica, although for the most part these materials are less available to women, especially lesbians. Libraries rarely collect sexual material.

Since the early 1970s there has been a growing movement of gay and lesbian historians and researchers recovering and collecting information on lesbian and gay history. There are now several gay and lesbian archives, women's archives, and lesbian archives from which to draw information.

2. There is also the widely held theory that women are more sexually stimulated by written material, as it involves individual imagination and the consequent personalizing opportunity. This is not so possible with images, which are by their nature more literal and potentially more "closed" to personalizing than literature. While these ideas hold some truth, the social circumstances of women's greater participation in and consequent trust of literature must play a part.

3. Some of the documentary evidence of lesbian existence in the 19th century is related to the discovery of specific women passing as men in order to enjoy male wages and freedoms.

4 See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981) for an extensive investigation into romantic friendship.

5. By contrast, male sexual interaction is rarely if ever seen within this material and specific laws were established to prohibit and punish gay male sexual activity.

6. While lesbian sexual activity was rarely prohibited by law, various legal restrictions (such as those against cross-dressing, "disturbing public order," and "disorderly conduct") were selectively used to harass women, lesbians, and gay male transvestites whenever they were perceived to disrupt or challenge the prevailing social order.

7. While there is a strong and long tradition of women photographers, it is notable that there is little evidence that women photographers produced sexual imagery of any form as a part of their overall body of work. Imogen Cunningham's nude portraits of her husband, produced between 1910 and 1918, are rare exceptions.

8. C. Jane Grover, *The Positive Image* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 45-47.

9. Grover, p. 40.

10. This phrase is from Faderman.

11 It is interesting to note that the American Psychiatric Association did not remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders until 1973, after intensive pressure from gay rights activists and others.

12. See Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) for an overview of this period, as well as the many individual biographies of these women.

13. In seeking visual evidence of lesbian existence outside of direct sexual representation, butch-femme suggestions or simply the adoption of masculine clothing, are two of the most visible indicators of possible lesbian practice. However, it is important to remember that during this period the boyish (or garçon) look was popular for women who considered themselves modern and is not in itself indicative of lesbian practice.

14 Brassai, *The Secret Paris of the 30's*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), See "Sodom and Gommorah" section, and his descriptions of women at the club Le Monocle.

15. For a more complete history of this period see *Eldorado* (Berlin: Frölich & Kaufman, 1984).

16. Judith Schwarz's *Radical Feminists of Heterodox: Greenwich Village 1912-1940* (Lebanon, N.H.: New Victoria Publishers, 1982) examines the lives of nearly 100 women, many of whom were lesbians.

17. Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 124.

18. For more information on Bentley, see Eric Garber's article "Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," *Outlook* 1:1 (Spring 1988), p. 52-61.

19. Curiously, a part of the induction process for American recruits was to ask them directly if they had ever had sexual experience with a member of their own sex. For some recruits this open acknowledgement established a kind of "normalization" of the possibility. See Alan Bérubé, "Coming Out Under Fire," *Mother Jones*, February/March 1983, for additional information on the induction process and classification of homosexuals during World War II.

20. For more complete information on this period see Allan Bérubé, "Coming Out Under Fire" and John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

21 It is interesting to note that there is very little difference between high art and popular culture in the way that lesbians are represented.

22. See Faderman, especially pages 341-348.

23. For a comprehensive listing of lesbian pulp novels see Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature* (Naiad Press, 1981). Earlier versions of this book are more complete in their listings of lesbian pulp.

24. This book and its cover were specifically cited as exhibiting the "lurid" characteristics of pulp in a 1952 U.S. House Subcommittee investigation into pulp novels. In addition, in 1953, a salesman of this book was charged with selling indecent and lewd literature. He was acquitted on the basis that the book had redeeming literary merit.

25. Canada Customs censorship practices have limited the distribution of these videos, which are primarily produced in the U.S.

26. *Drawing the Line* was produced by Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones. *Bed of Roses* was a photo production group involving women of varying sexual orientations. Lesbians participating in the project were Cyndra MacDowall, Kim Fullerton, and Nina Levitt. Ruthann Tucker is a Toronto lesbian artist who has a continuing involvement in producing lesbian sexual imagery. Marg Moores, Almerinda Travassos, and Marusia Bociurkiw have explored sex in their videotapes. Mido Onera's films have also examined lesbian sex.