

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

More Than Throw-Away Fiction

Investigating Lesbian Pulp Fiction through the Lens of a Lesbian Textual Community

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Submitted: 12 January 2018

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Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends who have supported me through everything. To my departed grandmothers, Louise Bolitho and Norma Stratton -- each of whom pushed me to succeed despite my learning difficulties and provided me with spiritual and emotional guidance. I would like to thank my uncle, Brian Bolitho, for supporting me even when I wasn't aware of it. To my grandmother, Norma Stratton who provided me with spiritual and emotional guidance. To my father, Gary Stratton; to my second family, the Richmond's; to my long-time partner, Sam Wilkinson; to my dear friends, Diane and Sophie -- all of whom have supported me throughout my education and through the toughest times. And to all my friends who have aided me in various ways through this project.

To Dr Jan Campbell, who supervised me through my Masters and aided me in finding a research topic for this doctoral project. Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Danielle Fuller for her invaluable guidance, academic support, and patience.

Abstract

This thesis argues for and conducts close reading on lesbian pulp fiction published in the United States between 1950 and 1965. Though a thorough investigation of a lesbian textual community centred on the lesbian periodical, *The Ladder* (1956-1952), this thesis forms a lens through which to closely read lesbian pulp fiction novels. This thesis maintains that members of this textual community were invested in literary discussions, as evinced through the publication of book reviews. Moreover, the lesbian textual community of *The Ladder* actively participated in literary discussions through the 'Readers Respond' column. *Spring Fire* (1952) by Vin Packer and *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* (1957 to 1962) by Ann Bannon are investigated for implicit and explicit criticisms of 1950s sexual politics and the politics surrounding lesbian representation in popular media. For the members of *The Ladder's* lesbian textual community, pulp novels belonging to the 'Golden Age of Paperbacks' were more than cheaply produced reading materials.

Introduction

Locating a Pre-Stonewall Lesbian Textual Community in a Culture of Conformity

Lesbian writing plays a tremendous survival role and culture communication role for the lesbian reader [...] I think, because so many of us lived secret lives in small towns across the country, that The Book – The Lesbian in The Book – was the open field [...] It was the place where the doors and windows opened.

Joan Nestle, 1991¹

Of course, some of the readers were men, hoping for a pornographic buzz, but the fan mail came from women all over the United States [...] Lesbian readers were able to look past the cover: to find themselves between the pages. We always find ourselves.

Vin Packer, 2004²

In the above quotations, Joan Nestle and Vin Packer highlight a strong connection between lesbian women in the United States and the written word. ‘The Lesbian in The Book,’ to borrow Nestle’s phrasing, acted as a conduit through which isolated lesbians could ‘find themselves’ and access some form of lesbian community. For some, this may have been an imagined community,³ confined between the pages of lesbian-themed books, but for others,

¹ This quotation is from a 1991 interview between Joan Nestle and Kate Brandt. It appears in Brandt’s book, *Happy Endings: Lesbian Writers Talk About Their Lives and Work* (1993).

² Vin Packer, *Spring Fire*, (Cleis Press: San Francisco, 2004), p.ix.

³ As defined in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991). According to Anderson, ‘members of even the smallest nation will never know most of

the books fostered more tangible connections between lesbian readers and the authors of their cherished paperback novels through the exchange of letters. The appearance of lesbian pulp fiction novels in the early 1950s enabled lesbian women to be part of textual communities, even when there was no physical environment for them to access.⁴ As Vin Packer's comment quoted above indicates, lesbian readers sought and found imagined and emotionally significant connections with each other in the pages of lesbian pulp fiction novels. Packer further discusses the circumstances that lead to the publication of her debut book: the first lesbian pulp fiction novel.⁵ Packer's introduction helps to account for the birth of an unplanned cultural phenomenon. According to Packer, before the publication of *Spring Fire* in 1952, 'there were no magazines or newspapers about us, no clubs for us to belong to. Books written about us [lesbians] were very few with small print orders, and not reviewed in major publications.'⁶ Yet, the publication of Packer's first novel 'alerted the publishing world to the fact that there was a very large audience for books about lesbians.'⁷ Academic scholarship has recognised the cultural significance of lesbian pulp fiction within the field of lesbian literary history.⁸ The sale and consumption of lesbian pulp fiction novels have

their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,' Anderson, p. 6.

⁴ According to Martin Meeker, 'In 1950s United States, public establishments that catered to lesbians or even merely tolerated them were few and far between.' Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.77.

⁵ Packer's novel is analysed in Chapter two of this thesis.

⁶ Packer, pp.vii-viii

⁷ Ibid.,p.ix.

⁸ Suzanna Danuta Walters, 'As Her Hand Crept, Slowly Up her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp,' *Social Text*, 23, (Fall/Winter 1989); 83-101; Kate Adams, 'Making the World Safe for the Missionary Position: Images of the Lesbian in Post-World War II America,' in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (London: New York University Press, 1990), 255-274; Lilian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Yvonne

previously been examined in terms of their role as cultural artefacts and their existence in a queer historical landscape.⁹ The scholarship of Melissa Sky and Stephanie Foote have been invaluable to highlighting the cultural significance of lesbian pulp novels from this time period. Their work investigating of the novels as artefacts invite further investigation into their impact on a lesbian readership. Lillian Faderman, Yvonne Keller, and Erin A Smith, have further aided in the historical contextualisation of lesbian pulp, providing a basis for a New Historicist reading of lesbian pulp novels. Beyond their existence as cultural artefacts, however, lesbian pulp fiction books also played a role in the formation of lesbian textual communities in the United States. Some of these 'trashy' throw-away novels held social, cultural, and emotional value for lesbian readers in the 1950s and 1960s and exceeded their intended purpose as 'titillating' material for an assumed audience of voyeuristic heterosexual males. These pulps played a 'survival' role, according to Nestle, and enabled cold war lesbian

Keller, 'Pulp Politics: Strategies of Vision in Pro-Lesbian Pulp Novels 1955-1965' in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (London: Routledge, 1991), 1-25; Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, 'The Greyhound Bus Station in the Evolution of Lesbian Popular Culture,' in *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*, ed. Sally Munt, (New York : Columbia University Press, 1992); Keren Michele Cadora, *The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction* (Unpublished thesis, Stanford University, 1999); Meredith Miller, 'Secret Agents and Public Victims: The Implied Lesbian Reader,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 35.1, (Summer 2001), 37-58; Stephanie Foote, 'Deviant Classics: Pulps and the Making of Lesbian Print Culture,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 15.4, (2005); Yvonne Keller, "'Was it Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,' *American Quarterly*, 57.2 (June 2006), 385-410; Melissa Sky, "Cover Charge: Selling Sex and Survival in Lesbian Pulp Fiction," in *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, ed. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Erin A Smith, 'Pulp Sensations' in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. David Glover and Scott McCracken, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 141-158; Paula Rabinowitz, *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street*, (Princeton University Press: Oxford, 2014).

⁹ See Foote, Sky, Keller (1991 and 2006), Smith.

communities to form despite societal and cultural pressures for gay women to remain closeted.

According to Paula Rabinowitz in *American Pulp* (2014), Nestle's concept of the lesbian pulp as 'survival literature' –as 'a means through which 1950s middle-class heterosexual culture could be escaped, if briefly,'—has become clichéd.¹⁰ I disagree with Rabinowitz on this point. To identify the concept of 'survival lit' as a cliché, dismisses the significance of lesbian pulp novels at this point in American history. In addition to Nestle and Packer's commentary quoted above, several lesbian writers have noted the important role lesbian pulps played in their lives. According to American author Lee Lynch, 'these pulps were my initial message that there needs to be a lesbian literature, that I needed to read about myself [...] because it was such a thrill to read Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor, Ann Aldrich.'¹¹ While Lynch goes on to note the simultaneously damaging stereotypes in these pulp novels, she also maintains that lesbian pulp writers have 'given us [lesbians] something. They deserve some recognition.'¹² Moreover, according to Ann Bannon's experience both as a reader and as a writer lesbian pulp fiction was the 'only outlet [she] had' as a wife and mother. Thus, 'survival literature,' acts as a means of connection between disparate individuals living in the margins of mainstream society. While this concept may have become cliché within the narrative of lesbian literary history in the United States, I argue that the concept of 'survival literature,' can provide a one perspective through which lesbian pulp fiction can be examined. Lesbian pulp fiction novels should not only be viewed in terms of their cultural iconography,

¹⁰ Rabinowitz, p.187.

¹¹ Quoted in Kate Brandt, *Happy Endings: Lesbian Authors Talk about their Lives and Work*, (Naiad Press, 1993), pp.62-63.

¹² Ibid, pp.65-68.

but examined through close textual analysis, and viewed through the lens of the lesbian readership who accessed this 'throw away fiction' at their time of publication and immediately after. As this thesis will show, the 'pro-lesbian' pulps of the 'Golden Age' of lesbian pulp fiction can be read with a critical, discerning eye in ways that imagined a community of lesbian readers. The inherent and explicit ideas about gender and sexuality communicated through these texts are what made them survival literature for lesbian readers in the 1950s and 1960s. Using the lens of a lesbian textual community (LTC) surrounding *The Ladder* and through the close reading of selected texts, this thesis will argue that the content of certain lesbian pulp novels is able to surpass their categorisation as *throw-away* fiction.

In formulating its arguments, this thesis will answer the following questions: through a thorough investigation of lesbian pulp fiction and lesbian print culture in the 1950s and 1960s, what can we infer about an imagined textual community that read and interacted with lesbian pulp fiction? What subversive messages and meanings were conveyed through 'throw-away' paperback culture in spite of strict censorship? What positive messages about lesbians' lives were present in lesbian-themed media that preceded the Gay and Women's liberation movements of the 1970s? While there is limited evidence of how lesbian readers received these pulps, a serious consideration of these texts, closely read through the lens of *The Ladder's* LTC, enables us to examine the representations of lesbian identity and experience offered by Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952) and Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* (1957-1962). While the evidence of lesbian reader reception is limited to the pages of *The Ladder*, close reading of these texts through this particular lens can draw attention to the subversive and positive messages disseminated to lesbian readers in the 1950s and 1960s.

By accessing these often disregarded, 'low-brow' texts in an academic study, we are able to analyse the implicit and explicit commentary communicated through these popular works of fiction.

Pulp novels were designed to be consumed and then quickly disposed of. Nevertheless, many lesbians held onto or shared their pulp novels and other lesbian-themed print materials with their peers. The seemingly sudden publication of lesbian-themed paperbacks in the United States from 1950 may seem anomalous, given the cultural and political climate of the time -- however the availability of lesbian themed fiction at mid-century can be attributed to a change in how books were produced and marketed in the mid-twentieth century. Before considering lesbian pulp fiction paperbacks and their production in more detail, a political, cultural, and historical context of America in the 1950s and early 1960s must be taken into consideration, because the lived experience of lesbian readers is informed by the political and social climate at the time. This introduction will first review the historical context of life in early Cold War America with attention to the political climate and the impact of Cold War culture on homosexual men and women. Second, it will discuss the rise of paperback printing, and its place within print culture. It will moreover define and make a case for the academic study of certain lesbian pulp novels belonging to what Yvonne Keller has called 'The Golden Age' of lesbian pulp fiction.¹³

1. History of Homosexuality in the United States: 1950-1969

¹³ Keller, 2006.

America during the Cold War – but most specifically America in the 1950s – is often marked in the contemporary popular consciousness by a limiting nostalgic and simplified view of the times. Films like *American Graffiti* (1973), *Grease* (1978), and *Pleasantville* (1998), and in television shows like *Happy Days* (1974-1984), view the decade predominantly through the view point of white teenagers. While these films tackle the decade's repression of and taboos about sex, the lives of and issues facing the working class and minority groups – namely the struggles of black Americans – are largely ignored or glossed over. This limiting view of the 1950s as a 'simpler time' has lasted from the 1970s even through to our current decade. According to Douglass T Miller and Marion Novak in *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (1975), 'For many people, the 1950s came to symbolize a golden age of innocence and simplicity, an era supposedly unruffled by riots, racial violence, Vietnam, Watergate, assassinations.'¹⁴ This nostalgic view of the past demonstrated by popular film and media is as, Miller and Novak, argue, 'badly distorted'¹⁵ and fails to account for, or even mention the Red Scare, the Lavender Scare, and Jim Crow. According to Martin Halliwell,

The 1950s is one decade that looks flat and uncomplicated, dominated by Joe McCarthy's anti-communist accusations in the early decade and the benign face of Dwight D. Eisenhower in the mid to late 1950s. For left-liberals the decade is often written off as a low point for oppositional politics, whereas for conservatives, especially since the 1980s, it is a decade of consensus worthy of celebration. Whatever political perspective is adopted it is difficult to evade the

¹⁴ Douglas T Millar, and Marion Novak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. (Garden City New York: Doubleday & Compant, Inc., 1977), p.5.

¹⁵ Miller and Novak, p.5

shadow of the cold war. But, while it is tempting to read the cold war into all cultural products of the 1950s, this can be a reductive exercise.¹⁶

In other words, the 1950s were far from simple. Nevertheless, the persistence of 1950s' nostalgic output reappears in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and illustrate the ways in which American cultural output seems to yearn for 'simpler' times. According to Stephanie Coontz, a nostalgic view of the 1950s perpetuates 'the belief that the 1950s provided a more family-friendly economic and social environment, an easier climate in which to keep kids on the straight and narrow, and above all, a greater feeling of hope for a family's long-term future.'¹⁷ While this thesis agrees that the 1950s are far more complex than the popularised nostalgic views of the decade, it maintains that the pressures placed on individuals to conform to social norms – at least outwardly – stem from the anti-communist tensions ushered in by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee between 1950 and 1956.

Whilst McCarthy's fear-mongering only lasted until the US Senate voted to censure him in December 1954, the entire decade has been historically marked by the hundreds of Americans imprisoned on suspicion of communist ties and the thousands of men and women who lost their jobs on suspicion of communist activities.¹⁸ As David K Johnson argues, the

¹⁶ Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p.3

¹⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. (Basic Books, 1992), p.33

¹⁸ Miller and Novak, Halliwell, David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate*, 2nd ed, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987); Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1975); Stephen J Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* 2nd Ed. (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Leila J Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

historical emphasis on McCarthy's impact on American history minimises the 'moral and cultural concerns' behind the second Red Scare and concurrent 'Lavender Scare' of the decade. Moreover, studies of McCarthyism 'all but ignore how fears of communists and homosexuals overlapped.'¹⁹ Like those suspected of communist ties, men and women who were suspected of homosexuality or so-called 'sexual perversion' were subjected to wiretapping, and mail monitoring. Nevertheless, McCarthy himself was never involved with the investigation and the purge of homosexual men and women from government positions. As Johnson details, McCarthy distanced himself from congressional investigations and hearings into homosexuals under government employ because he feared a 'boomerang' effect: 'As an unmarried, middle-aged man, he was subject to gossip and rumour about his own sexuality.'²⁰

While McCarthy lends his name to an era of fear and conservative propaganda, the actions of one senator from Wisconsin could hardly explain the mass paranoia that marked the decade. According to Stephen Whitfield, America was 'haunted' by the 'spectre' of Communism beginning in the late 1940s after WWII, however, the reactive changes to American politics and culture were distinct from their European counterparts. Whitfield points out that while Churchill 'refused to establish a royal commission to investigate domestic Communism in Great Britain,' the United States diverged from its Western allies and willingly abandoned freedom of speech and freedom from fear in favour of imposing anti-communist actions taken by the government.²¹ A majority of Americans appeared to be

¹⁹ David K Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp.2-3

²⁰ Ibid. p.3

²¹ Whitfield, p.1,4.

willing and complicit in the repressive and often totalitarian nature of American society for the majority of the 1950s. Not only did the government seek to repress, contain, and uproot communism from America, but so too did the general public to the point that 'sometimes the private sphere was ahead of the government in such efforts as regulation and purification.'²² This *cultural* Cold War, according to Whitfield, resulted in 'the suffocation of liberty and the debasement of culture itself. Even by the narrowest chauvinistic criteria of the Cold War, the United States thus diminished its ability in the global struggle to be seen as an attractive and just society.'²³ For Whitfield, the cultural landscape in 1950s America was apolitical in response to the targeting of left-thinking artists, writers, and filmmakers during the Red Scare. The increasingly close-minded trajectory of mainstream American society, fed by fears of Communism, would lead from a Red Scare, to a Lavender one.

Action taken by the Legislative and Executive branches of US government led to the institutionalised discrimination of homosexual men and women during the 1950s.²⁴ For example, President Dwight D Eisenhower and his administration placed heavy emphasis on the moral character and general suitability of government employees. In Eisenhower's first television appearance, Attorney General Herbert Brownell Jr. claimed that while government employees may be loyal to the United States, they could still pose a security risk because their 'personal habits are such that they might be subject to blackmail by people who seek to destroy the safety of our country.'²⁵ Eisenhower later echoed this belief in a presidential news

²² Ibid, p.11

²³ Ibid. , p.11-12

²⁴ See Johnson, Meeker, Faderman, Nestle, and John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority, 1940-1970*, 2nd ed. (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁵ Quoted in Johnson., p.123.

conference and within his memoirs.²⁶ The Eisenhower administration's contention that homosexual government employees were more susceptible to blackmail prompted Executive Order 10450 in April 1953. Through the order, the newly formed 'Office of Personnel Management' with FBI support allowed for investigation into the personal lives of federal employees. As Section 8(a) details, '*Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, sexual perversion*'²⁷ was grounds for dismissal. 'Sexual perversion' included, but was not limited to, homosexuality. But the anti-homosexual sentiment of the Eisenhower Administration did not only affect government employees. The actions taken by the government reflected the mainstream moral ideology of the United States at the time. Many employers and members of the general public would follow the president's lead by discriminating against men and women who were discovered to be homosexual. This overt homophobic fear of sexual difference lasted beyond Eisenhower's presidency.

In 1967, CBS News Correspondent Mike Wallace appeared on black and white film to discuss the 'enigma' of the 'disturbing' and 'embarrassing' subject of homosexuality.²⁸ Wallace, with a stern face opens the forty-five minute programme by revealing mainstream

²⁶ 'We are talking security risks: if a man has done certain things that, you know, make him, well, a security risk in delicate positions – and I don't care what they are – where he is subject to a bit of blackmail or weakness.' President Eisenhower (December 16, 1953) 'Many loyal Americans, by reason of instability, alcoholism, homosexuality, or previous tendencies to associate with Communist-front groups, are unintentionally security risks' President Eisenhower in his presidential memoirs: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower: 1953* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958).

²⁷ Exec. Order No. 10450, 18 Fed. Reg. 2489, 3 CFR 1949-1953 (April 27, 1953).

<<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/10450.html>>

²⁸ Mike Wallace, William Peters, and Harry Morgan, 'The Homosexuals,' *CBS Reports*, (Aired: March 7, 1967). Accessed via *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals. Films On Demand*. Films Media Group, 1967. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.

public attitudes towards the topic of homosexuality. In the broadcast, Wallace informs the audience that CBS News commissioned a survey from the Opinion Research Corporation that revealed 'Americans consider homosexuality more harmful to society than adultery, abortion, or prostitution.'²⁹ Reactions to suspected homosexuality in an individual were severe. As Wallace states, in 1955 the people of Boise, Idaho (population thirty-four thousand at the time) attempted to 'stamp out homosexuality' in the town, but failed. According to the report, the move to seek out and punish homosexuals had a socially devastating impact on Boise's citizens:

Everyone was suspect. Men were afraid to be seen together. Weekly poker games among men who had known each other for years were cancelled. There were reports that many high school boys were involved. A prominent banker [and] a leading attorney was arrested along with clerks, repairmen, salesmen. Altogether hundreds were interrogated [...]. When it was over, fifteen months later, one homosexual was in a penitentiary with a life sentence, two received fifteen-year terms, one ten years, two seven years, and scores of lives were ruined.³⁰

The public fear of homosexuality was nation-wide, and not just isolated to individual towns. The behaviours of the Boise citizens in reaction to homosexuality are similar to Joan Nestle's account of communist fears around the same time:

If you spoke the wrong words or supported the wrong people, you were labelled un-American. You were sent into national, and in many cases private, exile [...] I hear read over the radio the names of those who were to be called in front of the Committee, before the Committee even reached a city. Long enough in advance for employers to fire the accused, long enough to give neighbors time to ostracize the marked family, long enough to give the stigmatized individuals time to take

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

their lives. None of this was done by legal power. It was done by the power of orthodoxy, of one prevailing view of how to make the country safe. It was not trial by jury in a court of law: it was conviction by innuendo, by association, by labelling.³¹

In comparing Nestle's memory of growing up in the 1950s and Wallace's 1967 report it becomes clear that anti-communist and anti-homosexual sentiment placed immense pressure on individual Americans (regardless of sexual orientation) to conform to strict cultural mores. Failing to adhere to these cultural codes would lead to legal and social punishment. Thus, many were forced to conceal or 'closet' their sexual identity.

As the documentary, *Before Stonewall* (1985) details,³² many middle-class homosexual men and women had to keep their sexual identity hidden from friends and family. Gay bars in metropolitan areas like New York and San Francisco were subject to frequent raids.³³ One interviewee recalls how in some cases the names of the arrested patrons would appear in the newspapers the next day. While there were a few exceptions, for the most part, gay men and women lived in constant fear of discovery. Like communists, homosexuals were treated with fear and suspicion. Similarities can also be seen between the media coverage of homosexuality during the 1950s and 1960s. One 1961 Public Service Announcement produced by the Police Department of Inglewood, California portrayed male homosexuals as predatory and paedophilic. In the 15 minute short film, the Narrator warns young boys that the homosexuality is 'A sickness that was not visible, like small pox, but no less dangerous and

³¹ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), p.141.

³² *Before Stonewall*, dir. Greta Schiller, (First Run Features, 1985), [On DVD].

³³ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

contagious; a sickness of the mind.’³⁴ While Communism and homosexuality were viewed as invisible threats, only homosexuality was viewed in terms of mental illness.

The conflation of homosexuality and mental illness originates in the way that sexuality has been conceptualised within the field of American psychoanalysis. During the late 1940s and through to the present, American psychoanalysis had been heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud’s theories of human development. According to Freud, homosexuality in men and women came through their childhood experience. His theories posited that all humans begin in a ‘bisexual’ state, and that through their childhood experiences would either become homosexual or heterosexual.³⁵ Prior to Freud’s theory, society viewed homosexuality as something more physically identifiable. British Sexologist Havelock Ellis theorised that homosexual men and women were ‘inverts’ who were born in the wrong body, and could be identified by physical characteristics: i.e. a homosexual woman would appear more physically masculine, and a man would appear more feminine.³⁶ Freud’s theories resulted in the destabilisation of the ways in which human sexuality was understood by mainstream society. Unlike Ellis’s Invert Principle, Freud’s theories suggested that anyone, regardless of their physical femininity or masculinity, could become homosexually oriented. As Sherrie Inness argues in *The Lesbian Menace* (1997), the result of this shift in psychoanalytic thought was

³⁴ *Boys Beware*, dir. Sid Davis, (Sydney Davis Productions, 1961).

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, (London: Penguin, 1991).

³⁶ Havelock Ellis, ‘School-Friendships of Girls,’ in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, (New York: Random House, 1942), 368-84; -- *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol 2., Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1906); Richard Von Kraft Ebbing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Medico-Forensic Study*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1956); Sherri A Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and Representation of Lesbian Life*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); David F Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

destabilising to the American consciousness. She argues that 'by accepting Freud's statements about the sources of Lesbianism, a woman could never feel completely secure in her sexual orientation. A tendency to homosexuality may surface at any time to challenge the tenuous grasp she has on heterosexuality.'³⁷ Inness's argument can also be applied to male experience as well. This created a heightened sense of uncertainty, but also led to a misreading of Freud's theory. While there is no evidence³⁸ to suggest that Freud would condone the attempts to 'treat' or 'cure' homosexuality, the American Psychoanalytic School of Behaviourism believed that homosexuality was a curable affliction.³⁹

In attempts to 'cure' homosexuality, men and women volunteered for or were forced into various treatments. Often when men and women were discovered to be homosexual, they were sentenced to mental institutions – either by their families or by the state – because they were considered to be 'sexual psychopaths'. At mental institutions, such as the Atascadero Mental Facility in California, men and women underwent aversion therapy; this involved men and women being shown pornographic nudes while undergoing painful shock treatments or being made physically ill to inhibit their ability to be aroused by members of the same sex.⁴⁰ Treatments also included electroshock therapy, sterilisation, castration, and lobotomies that

³⁷ Inness, p.27.

³⁸ According to Jan Campbell in *Arguing with the Phallus* (2000), 'Freud's views on homosexuality were contradictory. On the one hand he viewed it in relatively unbiased terms, seeing it as part of everyone's bisexuality [...] Homosexuality is, for Freud, an inversion of normal sexuality, but it is also a part of the naturally occurring polymorphous perversity of infantile life. A perversity, then, that had to be given up in order to accede the heterosexual difference and sublimation of the Oedipal complex' (p.132).

³⁹ Greenberg, pp.430-433; M.P. Feldman, 'Aversion Therapy for sexual deviations: A critical review' in *Psychological Bulletin*, 65.2, 1966, 65-79; Joseph W Blitch and Stephen N Haynes, 'Multiple Behavioral Techniques in a Case of Female Homosexuality' in *Journal of Behavioral Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 3.4, 1972, 319-322.

⁴⁰ Inness, p.1; *Before Stonewall*.

would leave the patient in a vegetative state. Thus to be homosexual was – to mainstream America – to be ‘other’ and un-American. Homosexuality was viewed as criminal – something to be cured, corrected, or contained through psychiatric procedure or incarceration. Thus, homosexual men and women became medically, legally, and socially, marginalised. This deeply rooted hostility toward homosexuality that developed during the Cold War, lead to the social isolation of gay men and lesbians at this time. It thus seems improbable that lesbian and gay communities would or could form under such adversities.

Indeed as gay men and lesbians were marginalised by society, information on homosexuality and its distribution was strictly monitored. Comstock laws prohibited the distribution of *obscene* materials prior to 1950.⁴¹ According to Martin Meeker, judges and juries used the Hicklin Test to review literature, art, and scholarship with a vague definition of obscenity: ‘anything [...] that could be said to corrupt the minds or morals of the most susceptible members of a community, usually meaning children.’⁴² It was not until 1957 when the definitions of obscenity were narrowed in the Supreme Court decision *Roth v. United States*.⁴³ Yet, as the political, social, legal, and medical climates in the United States developed a profoundly hostile environment for homosexual individuals, Homophile Organisations formed: The Mattachine Society (1950), One, Inc. (1955), and the Daughters of Bilitis (1956). These groups became a means of organising gay men and lesbians, and began to publish newsletters and magazines in the development of what Meeker describes as a

⁴¹ Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) p.19; M. Miller, p.40.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

'communication network.'⁴⁴ As Meeker argues, this published material 'became conduits of communication between the homophile organisations and their members as well as a means of outreach to those who had never heard of such organizations.'⁴⁵ In spite of the risk it is clear that these groups formed out of a need to connect with others like themselves.⁴⁶ For the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), in particular, their formation grew from a need to organise outside of the lesbian bar space. Moreover as many historians demonstrate, public space for lesbians to socialise was highly limited, and those spaces that did exist (bars), were not a safe environment.⁴⁷ As I show in Chapter One, the publication of *The Ladder*, by the DOB not only provided lesbians with a tool for political organisation, but it led to the formation of a lesbian textual community, through which lesbian readers would discuss and share lesbian themed literature. Despite the adversity faced by lesbians in Pre-Stonewall America, at least one lesbian textual community was able to form around *The Ladder*. The mainstream social climate for lesbians in the United States, and the aforementioned risks, would have deterred many from openly expressing an interest in lesbian literary culture. This literary culture, in part developed through lesbian paperback originals, or lesbian pulp fiction. This prolific genre of paperbacks would not have been possible without the proliferation of cheaply produced reading materials at the end of World War II. It is thus important to detail the history of paperback novels in the United States.

⁴⁴ In his book, Meeker demonstrates 'how communication networks serve as engines of social change and cultural invention' (p.15).

⁴⁵ Meeker, p.34

⁴⁶ Meeker, D'Emilio, Nestle, Faderman, Brandt, and Soares.

⁴⁷ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) ; Marcia M Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006);

2. The Rise and Revolution of Paperback Novels in American Popular Culture

The rise of the paperback market can be attributed to the distribution of paperback books to soldiers during World War II. According to John Y. Cole, 'Between 1943 and 1947, nearly 123 million copies of 1,322 titles of these flat, wide, and very pocketable paperbacks were distributed to U.S. Armed Forces around the world.'⁴⁸ The book shipments contained best-sellers, classics, mysteries, history, and poetry. Because the paperbacks were printed on low-quality paper, they could be produced cheaply, and the books could be disposed of easily after readers were finished with them. In producing Armed Services Editions of their titles, American publishers fostered a new group of American readers. After the war ended, the demand for cheap reading material continued.

While publishing houses like Fawcett, Pocket Books, Bantam, ACE, Signet and Dell would continue to reprint classic and contemporary best sellers, paperback originals or 'pulp fiction' made up a majority of their sales. According to Erin A Smith,

These stories were regarded as scandalous, because they often explored transgressive cultures (criminals, juvenile delinquents, lesbians), and their characters were not always punished for their deviance [...] libraries would not carry them and newspapers did not review them [...] like the dime-novel and pulp-magazine fiction that proceeded them, these stories were commodities, and the authors name was often subordinated to the publisher's brand.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ John Y Cole, 'The Armed Services Editions: An Introduction,' in *Books in Action: The Armed Services Edition*, ed. John Y Cole, (Washington: The Library of Congress, 1984), 1 – 11, p.3.

⁴⁹ Erin A Smith, 'Pulp Sensations' in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. David Glover and Scott McCracken, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 141-158, p.153.

While there are exceptions, the protagonists of pulp novels were considered morally reprehensible and criminal figures.

Like the Army paperbacks, commercial paperbacks were cheaply produced. As a result, pulp novels were affordable to working-class Americans. In other words, paperbacks reached a far wider audience than hardback books in previous decades. Readers of pulp novels ranged both in socioeconomic status and in education level. In terms of distribution, pulp novels appealed to a readership of travellers. Because they were available almost exclusively at newsstands, drug stores, bus stations and train stations, readers were not required to search for books through a bookseller. This fact also points to how paperback publishers depended on impulse purchases. The colourful, sexualised imagery of pulp covers drew the eye and promised adventure, mystery, and intrigue. In Smith's words, 'Trashy paperback originals mingled promiscuously with cheap reprints of literary classics [...] One could not tell one from the cover alone whether cultural uplift or sensationalised corruption lay within and this uncertainty tended to blur any clear distinction between high & low.'⁵⁰ The reason that the strict censors and moral groups⁵¹ permitted these books to be published, was because it was assumed that the audience was composed of 'straight men seeking titillation.'⁵²

Lesbian pulp fiction was perhaps the most unexpected genre of paperback novels in the 1950s;⁵³ the first of which was Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* in 1952. Packer's forward to the 2004

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.154.

⁵¹ Namely the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials established by the House of Representatives in 1952.

⁵² Smith, p.155.

⁵³ Packer, 2004.

reprint of her book reveals much about the publication practices and about the pressure placed on publishers by the censors during the 1950s. Though many subjects were considered permissible for a male readership, the Post-Master would still reject an entire shipment of books if one title was considered to be obscene.⁵⁴ Despite Gold Medal Editor Dick Carroll's doubts that Packer's lesbian paperback would be financially successful, *Spring Fire* was a huge success: the first printing sold nearly 1.5 million copies and prompted 'cartons' of fan mail. Second and third printings were immediately ordered. The novel was not only genre defining but, in Packer's words, 'If anything, *Spring Fire* [...] alerted the publishing world to the fact that there was a very large audience for books about lesbians. Of course, some of the readers were men, hoping for a pornographic buzz, but the fan mail came from women all over the United States.'⁵⁵ Novel's like *Spring Fire* and Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker* chronicles prompted a response not only from male readers, but from many lesbian readers who sought some form of connection with others like themselves. The connections fostered between the authors of these pulps and their lesbian readers amidst a period of heightened moral and sexual conformity in the United States is the basis for the research in this thesis.

In an attempt to uncover the documented communications between female pulp authors and their readers, I discovered *The Ladder*, an all-in-one lesbian magazine and its literary content, which shows evidence of a relationship between readers of lesbian-themed texts and the authors and publishers. *The Ladder*, produced by the homophile organisation, Daughters of Bilitis, was the only lesbian magazine published in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Through this magazine, it is possible to show that the women who

⁵⁴ Packer, p.vi.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

consumed lesbian texts (or ‘lesbiana’) did not do so passively, as shown by the book reviews, readers’ letters, and book advertising that appear in *The Ladder*. The lesbian readers were also concerned with how lesbian identity and experience was represented, and in some instances the aesthetic or literary quality of the materials they were reading. For this reason, it is important to closely examine both *The Ladder*, and lesbian pulp fiction with respect to what was communicated through their publication and how lesbian readers responded to the texts. Chapter one closely examines the book reviews and literary-themed contributions to *The Ladder* in order to glean an explicit understanding of the tastes and reading habits of those who participated in what I have identified as a lesbian textual community.

The specific texts I focus on in chapters two, three, and four fall into a specific category of lesbian pulp fiction. In her article “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,’ Yvonne Keller argues that lesbian pulp fiction is often defined by the cover of the books rather than the content within. She writes, ‘I define lesbian pulps through four criteria. First, they are published between 1950 and 1965; second, they have some lesbian content; third, they must be mass-market paperbacks; and fourth, they are classifiable as potentially lesbian by their cover art or copy.’⁵⁶ Keller also divides lesbian pulp fiction into two ‘subsets’ or subgenres: the *virile adventures* and the *pro-lesbian* pulps. *Virile adventure* pulps were the more ‘dominant form of lesbian representation in [pulp] culture,’ making up ‘about 85%’ of lesbian pulp publications.⁵⁷ As these stories were ‘generally intended for a straight male, white, working-to-middle-class, voyeuristic audience; often have a male hero; and are typically written by a male author or,

⁵⁶ Yvonne Keller, “‘Was it Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife so Passionately’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965”, *American Quarterly*, 57.2 (June 2006), 385-410, p.395.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.401.

rather, an author with a male pseudonym', they will not be the subject of my analysis.⁵⁸ This thesis will address the texts that Keller classifies as the *pro-lesbian pulps*, due to their focus on women and lesbian protagonists. This thesis is in agreement with Keller's categorisation, as it is concerned with the subversive messages communicated to lesbian readers through lesbian pulp titles, and the means of positive lesbian representation within the texts, only pro-lesbian pulp novels factor into my close textual analysis.

What some consider the 'first lesbian pulp' was written by French Tereska Torres in 1950.⁵⁹ Torres' *Women's Barrack* (1950) sold 2.5 million copies in the United States between its publication and 1975.⁶⁰ The success of Torres' paperback proved that there was a receptive audience for lesbian themed material. However, I did not include Torres' paperback in my study, as it was not written by an American author. Vin Packer published *Spring Fire* in 1952 and, according to Melissa Sky, it was 'instant best seller' and 'inspired the craze' of lesbian pulps.⁶¹ Packer notes her 'embarrassment' of the quality of her novel in the introduction to the 2004 edition of *Spring Fire*.⁶² Nevertheless, her seminal lesbian paperback helped set a template for lesbian fiction that would be the standard for lesbian paperbacks until 1957 with the rise of pro-lesbian pulps.⁶³

Perhaps the most celebrated author of pro-lesbian pulps is Ann Bannon. All but one of the six titles in her *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* series has been reprinted by Naiad press in the 1980s and Cleis press in the 2000s. In an introduction to the 2001 Cleis release of *Odd Girl Out*,

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.400.

⁵⁹ Robinowitz, Sky, Keller (1991 and 2006).

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.389.

⁶¹ Sky.

⁶² Packer, p.ix

⁶³ Keller, p.392.

Bannon reflects on her experience of writing her famous pulps: 'They were born in the hostile era of McCarthyism and rigid male/female sex roles, yet still speak to readers in the twenty-first century, giving them a historical snapshot of the times.'⁶⁴ The continued popularity and readership of Bannon's fiction has made her work the primary focus of a growing literature on lesbian pulp fiction.⁶⁵ They have become the central focus of historical and sociological studies of lesbian community and lesbian print culture between 1950 and 1970. Bannon herself never expected to have her work scrutinized to this degree, and the cultural environment in which genre fiction was produced did not leave room for writers to be concerned with semantics and rhetoric. As Bannon reiterates in the introductions to her reprints, if she had known about the future fame of her work, the novels might have been of higher quality, 'but also immeasurably more cautious' and 'it would have made them self-conscious and defensive, as well.'⁶⁶ Lesbian pulps—as with detective, thriller and other romance paperbacks – were widely available to a growing readership from the 1940s onwards.⁶⁷ Bannon knew her books were (cheaply) mass-produced, but she was unaware that their popularity would be so long-lived, and their historical significance would become the subject of academic study. Many of these studies have focused on the materiality of these texts and their role as cultural artefacts given their status as 'low-brow' fiction, with little to no aesthetic merit.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001), p.v.

⁶⁵ See note 8.

⁶⁶ Ann Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), p.v.

⁶⁷ Keller.

⁶⁸ Sky, Foote, Smith, Jaye Zimet, *Strange Sisters*, (New York, NY: Viking Studio, 1999). Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp; Perverted Passions from the Golden age of the Paperback*, (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2001),

In addition to focusing on the aesthetic as a marker of textual value, it is equally productive to examine the materiality of Bannon's books; that is to say: the process of Bannon's work becoming cultural artefacts is equally important to the content of her stories. In a 2005 study about the circulation of pulps and how they become 'texts,' Stephanie Foote uses Bannon's work to demonstrate how a book gains cultural significance and becomes an artefact; its content becomes cultural text. Foote observes that (lesbian) pulps make up 'a secret history of readers.'⁶⁹ The very act of reading pulp fiction marks their value: 'The more they are read, the more they are valued, and the more they are read, the closer the relationship between the very act of circulation and reading and the construction of a lesbian community becomes.'⁷⁰ In this way, Bannon's texts became more than just books for her audience and for herself. Readers, authors and characters participated in a form of subversive communication allowing for emotional connections otherwise unattainable in the repressive (and oppressive) climate of an overtly heteropatriarchal society. Foote's article not only explores how a book becomes a text, but it helps to establish the emotional charge that pulp fiction can carry for a reader, and how, as a community-adopted text, the meaning of lesbian pulps (for the writer and for the reader) may be influenced by politics. Ann Bannon, as well as other pulp fiction authors received letters from their readers who found the pulps they read as a place to turn to in the midst of emotional personal experiences. Thus, there is power and value in the act of reading a book, for characters and readers alike participate in a print community framed by the author. As a means of communicating ideas and connecting readers through shared 'links,' as Bannon puts it, the text achieves the totemic ability to unite dispersed individuals.

⁶⁹Foote, " , p.178.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Foote also makes an important distinction between book and text, which is a useful approach for studying lesbian pulp fiction. The books in their original form -- as artefacts-- exist across time periods. For those (lesbian women and gay men) who were raised in and lived through Pre-Stonewall America, the books are something concrete and physical. As Foote points out, 'Books have weight and heft; they take up space on bookshelves; and they have dog-eared pages, broken spines, and coffee stains. They are marked in all kinds of idiosyncratic ways by their users.'⁷¹ Texts, however 'have the dubious privilege of disembodiment.'⁷² Bannon points out in her introduction to *I am a Woman* (2002), that her own stories took on an 'ephemeral' quality even while the books themselves were 'fragile' and subject to degradation: 'The glue dried and cracked, the pages fell out, the paper yellowed after mere months, and the ink ate right through it anyway.'⁷³ The book is thus a vehicle for the text; each aspect of a written work, the physicality of the object and its textuality, are different ways in which we can analyse the cultural value of lesbian pulp fiction.

Melissa Sky's work has further contributed to a critical emphasis on the materiality of pulp fiction novels. In her chapter of *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction* (2007), Sky looks specifically at how marketing (including the cover) influences a reader's understanding of the text. Her chapter approaches Bannon's texts by focusing on their covers and highlight the materiality of a text as an integral aspect of the reading process. In looking at the covers of Bannon's books across different editions (and time periods) Sky highlights the shift from the original cover art and re-releases from the '50s and '60s, to the covers of the Naiad press copies, to the more recent Cleis Press: from pathological

⁷¹ Ibid., p.188.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ann Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2002), p.vi.

illustrations of male perspective, to feminist renditions that attempt to reflect feminist sentiment of the 1980s, to a nostalgic splicing of old pulp images that seem like 'literary slumming, even as they simultaneously proclaim the series' literary and historical importance.'⁷⁴ Thus, examining book covers and marketing practices becomes a means of examining traces of reader experience and of identifying clues about the formation of a lesbian community of readers. While reading the covers allows for one form of inquiry into the reading practices of lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s, I am interested in the information written between the covers of *Spring Fire* and the Beebo Brinker Chronicles. The exterior covers of these books may have given clues to lesbian consumers, but I am more interested in the implicit and explicit messages communicated to lesbian readers in the texts themselves, particularly as they sought a wide audience in spite of a strict culture of conformity and a society that deeply feared homosexuality. It is thus important to take into consideration the cultural climate in which lesbian paperbacks and *The Ladder* were published.

3. Why Research Lesbian Pulp Fiction and *The Ladder*?

The study of popular culture within the fields of History and Literature stems from an ideological shift in what subjects and material were deemed worthy for academic consideration. From the 1980s and early 1990s, academics have called into question the development of the Western Canon and its exclusion of popular culture – what has been

⁷⁴ Sky, p.145.

labelled as 'low culture.'⁷⁵ The formation of the literary canon has often meant that the work of minority groups becomes excluded or labelled into sub-canons. The impact of this process thus separates, closets, and/or conceals the work of those who do not fall into the category of 'western white males,' with few exceptions. For example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *The Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (1988) utilises the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida in the development of an 'alternative conception of literary evaluation.'⁷⁶ In criticism of previous schools of literary study, Herrnstein Smith argues that there can be no objective evaluation of 'value' within literary studies:

...because we [readers and critics of literature] are neither omniscient nor immortal and do have particular interests, we will, at any given moment, be viewing it [art/literature/etc.] from *some* perspective. It is from such a perspective that we experience the value of a work and also from such a perspective that we estimate its probable value for others.⁷⁷

In other words, Kantian concepts of disinterestedness in aesthetic evaluation are impossible in practical evaluations of cultural output. In her example of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Herrnstein Smith rightly argues that acts of publishing, printing, purchasing, and preserving are 'implicit acts of evaluation' regardless of the motives behind these acts. I would also add

⁷⁵ Smith, Rabinowitz, Lawrence W Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1988); Terry Palmer, *Pot Boilers: Methods, Concepts and Case Studies in Popular Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 1991); Janice A Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. (Cape Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); David Glover, *Vampires, Mummies and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction*, (London: Duke University Press, 1996); Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998); Tom Perrin, *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction: Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945-75*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015),

⁷⁶ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *The Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.13.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

to this that the act of reading, while sometimes connected to ‘purchasing,’ is also an evaluative act. However whimsical or considered the motivation for a reader to choose a text to read – be it a purchase based on an impulse, cover-art, a book review, or a suggestion made by a friend – the very act of reading and engaging with a text participates in an evaluation process.

As I explore in Chapter One, lesbian pulp fiction novels were chosen and evaluated by a lesbian readership as evinced by the published material within *The Ladder*. These lesbian pulps – however aesthetically poor the writing – were valued in terms of the varied impact they had on lesbian readers in the 1950s and 1960s. Within the context of a McCarthyite culture of conformity, lesbians had few resources for information on lesbianism in the 1950s and 1960s. Vin Packer’s *Spring Fire* (1952) illustrates this fact when the main character, Susan Mitchell, attempts to find a definition for *lesbian* in her University’s Library and finds very little on the subject.⁷⁸ For some, lesbian pulps were the only connection lesbians (especially in rural America) had to a lesbian community, as they were one of few easily accessible sources of information. This is not to argue that the portrayals of lesbian women within pulp novels are accurate; most depictions of lesbian women in pulps were exaggerations designed to capture the interest of a male audience. As previously mentioned, some pulps were kinder and more sensitive in their portrayal of lesbian characters than others.

The novels themselves, as physical objects, were also often cherished and passed on from reader to reader. In Valerie Taylor’s *Return to Lesbos* (1963), the main character, Frances Olenfield searches for some form of connection to her lesbian identity, after her husband has moved her out to the Illinois suburbs. Through the interactions between Francis, Vince (a gay

⁷⁸ Packer, pp.81-83.

man), and Erika (a lesbian woman), Taylor exemplifies the connections lesbian readers had to novels that were often considered 'disposable' or 'throw-away' fiction. Francis is interested in purchasing Erika's books from the thrift store own by Vince:

Here were the Ann Bannon books side-by-side with Jeannette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, *North Beach Girl*, and *Take Me Home* next to the Covici-Friede edition of *The Well of Loneliness*, dated 1928. Here, Huddled together as though for warmth in and unfriendly world were Gore Vidal and a tall thin volume of Baudelaire, translated by someone she had never heard of. Here were books in the field, for people with a special interest, a special orientation.⁷⁹

In this passage, Taylor has grouped together pulp novels alongside texts considered to be part of high culture, illustrating the wide variety of genres accessed by lesbian readers during the 1950s and 1960s. Like Erika's collection of lesbian themed texts, the titles of lesbian-themed books discussed in *The Ladder* were equally varied in their genre; high and low culture, fiction and non-fiction works were reviewed and listed together. As I argue in Chapter One, the variety of texts discussed through *The Ladder* shows precisely how concerned lesbian readers were in this particular lesbian textual community about access to lesbian themed titles, and the specific content of their books. Thus, the lens of *The Ladder's* textual community can give specific insight into the ways in which lesbians interacted with cultural representations of themselves in popular fiction.

Through adopting a lens of *The Ladder's* LTC as a tool for evaluating pro-lesbian pulps, I am contributing to a growing field within academic research that reconsiders popular texts

⁷⁹ *North Beach Girl* (1960) by John Trinian is a murder mystery focused on beatnik culture and the lesbian main character, Erin. *Take Me Home* (1959) is a lesbian pulp novel by Fletcher Flora. Valerie Taylor *Return to Lesbos*, Feminist Press, (New York: The City University of New York, 2013), p.26.

and their place in cultural history. Several academic studies over the past twenty years have contributed to the study of popular fiction; or in the very least the incorporation of popular narratives into academic studies in history, print culture, and American studies.⁸⁰ In *The Culture of the Cold War* (1991), for example, Stephen J Whitfield's historical evaluation of the Cold War utilises popular detective fiction by Mickey Spillane to exemplify one popularised (American) response to the perceived Communist threat in the early 1950s. Analysis of Spillane's novels featuring Mike Hammer – a private investigator-- calls for 'the cultural historian to discard aesthetic sensitivities [...] for the sake of listening to one of the most stridently representative and sensationalist voices of the era.'⁸¹ In Spillane's detective novels –which sold over seventeen million copies between 1950 and 1953⁸²-- Hammer's iconography represents a specific brand of American masculinity that is anti-mob, anti-intellectual, anti-homosexual, and anti- communist. Moreover, in Whitfield's reading of Hammer's character, Spillane's fiction offers only 'violent prophylaxis' as the solution to America's Communist 'plague.'⁸³ For Whitfield the analysis of popular fiction gives a specified insight into the ideologies communicated to American readers through popularised and readily available media:

To appraise the literary significance of such fiction would be utterly irrelevant, to sermonize against such appalling crudeness equally pointless. What needs to be underscored is that, at least in the night battles of the Cold War for which Spillane recruited more Americans than any other author, the procedural rules and legal guarantees that helped make a civil society worth defending were treated with savage contempt. Justice was imagined as coming from the barrel

⁸⁰ See Note 72.

⁸¹ Whitfield, p.34.

⁸² Ibid, p.35.

⁸³ Ibid, p.36.

of a pistol, and cruelty was not confined to Party headquarters but was exalted in the exploits of Mike Hammer [...] The end appeared to justify the means, so that it is almost too obvious to insist upon the analogy between the stigma that Spillane's fiction described and the methods that McCarthyism employed.⁸⁴

In other words, to assess the quality of the prose or narrative structure of pulp novels would be pointless, as they provide something else: an insight into a popular understanding of the era. This thesis is in agreement with Whitfield's evaluation of popular fiction within a literary context. Attempting to absorb most popular media, and more specifically pulp fiction novels into a literary canon would – for the most part – be a pointless attempt to elevate pulp fiction to 'high-culture.' This thesis does not argue for the inclusion of *Spring Fire* and the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* into a larger canon of American Literature. Rather, my intention in this study is to show how re-evaluating and closely reading pulp fictions through a specific lens can lead to more nuanced ideological decoding of popular media and the messages disseminated to one or more group of readers.

Further and more extensive cultural studies of popular paperback novels can be found in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and *A Feeling for Books* (1999). In the former, Radway details and analyses the ways in which a specific group of housewives of Smithton (a pseudonym given to the town where her study takes place) read and engaged with romance novels. In *A Feeling for Books*, Radway focuses on the formation of the Book of the Month Club in which consumers ordered from a limited selection of titles through the post. Radway's study of the readers of romance fiction within a specific time and context contributes to the field of American Cultural studies. Radway's respective studies of low-brow and middlebrow

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.37

fiction sets a relatively new precedent for utilising popular media in academic studies of American Culture. Like Radway's work, this thesis aims to give insight into the ways a specific audience accessed and interacted with popular fiction, though it takes one step beyond facts and figures, utilising them to interpret the texts through close reading practices.

More recently, in *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction* (2015), Tom Perrin 'departs from the critical approach made by Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* and other studies, by analysing middlebrow literature by focusing on the institutions and structures through which it was marketed and distributed [...], instead focusing on close-reading middlebrow texts themselves.'⁸⁵ While Perrin focuses on texts belonging specifically to 'middlebrow' literary culture, in close reading texts like Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952), he examines the ways in which middlebrow literature engaged with and responded to Modernism. As Perring argues, 'the term *middlebrow* may have been popularized by critics deriding inferior writers who had, in their view, failed to understand that modernism was the only artistic mode fit to represent the mid-century United States, but texts such as *The Price of Salt* demonstrate that such middlebrow fiction could, from a different perspective, enable novelists like Highsmith to engage with and critique a modernism whose limitations were increasingly apparent.'⁸⁶ Though I argue that Perrin incorrectly labels *The Price of Salt* as lesbian pulp fiction,⁸⁷ he successfully examines the way in which popular forms of literature

⁸⁵ Perrin, p.3.

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp.88-89.

⁸⁷ Ibid. pp.72-73. – *The Price of Salt* was indeed 'pulped' through a paperback publication in 1953, in the same way that works of Classic literature were republished with pulp-fiction exteriors. However, these works were not originally published with the pulp market in mind, and cannot but thus classified. Nevertheless, this practice did blur the lines between high and low culture, for they were packaged in the same was as paperback original works.

engaged with what was deemed to be high culture. In doing so, Perrin's work opens avenues of literary study into popular fiction, and demonstrates the ways in which popular media engaged with ideologies outside their own genre.

As mentioned in my discussion and definition of lesbian pulp fiction, other studies have examined the books as cultural products, but this thesis is more concerned with the content of *The Ladder* and lesbian pulp novels in order to define the lesbian textual community associated with the magazine. Meanwhile, the novels selected for my research were based on the availability of the texts in the present day. Both Ann Bannon and Marijane Meaker's works have enjoyed multiple reprints over the last sixty years, including the republication of the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* (2001-2003) and *Spring Fire* (2004) by Cleis Press. Cleis press has further released audiobooks for Bannon and Meaker's works in 2011 and 2012. Other texts are slowly being reprinted as time goes on. For example, throughout the course of my studies, the Feminist Press has reprinted Valerie Taylor's *Strangers on Lesbos* (1960) and *Return to Lesbos* (1963) in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Materials belonging to Valerie Taylor were donated to Cornell University Library's Human Sexuality Collection in December of 1997 by Tee A. Corrine, executor of Taylor's estate, and sorted by volunteers by 1998. While the inclusion of Taylor's pulps would contribute to this thesis, due to the limitations of time, space, and funding, I have not been able to include the aforementioned pulps in my thesis. While I have been unable to include the equally valuable works of Taylor, Paula Christian, and Artemis Smith into this project, the pages of *The Ladder* has enabled me to form carefully considered lens through which these works might also be closely read in the future.

Through this lens, it becomes clear that the horizon of expectations from which pre-stonewall lesbians viewed pulp fiction went beyond genre expectations and incorporated their social and political concerns. For example, I discovered that Marijane Meaker (Ann Aldrich/ Vin Packer) had a feud with the DOB in the 1960s fuelled by her representation of lesbians in her non-fiction books written as Ann Aldrich. I learned that the reviews of Aldrich's work and letters sent in by lesbian readers made up a textual discussion on the ethics of lesbian representation in printed materials. During my research on special collections, I discovered that at the University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library had a near complete collection of physical copies of *The Ladder* and a complete collection of the magazine on Microfilm. I was also able to view a collection of essays edited by Aldrich, *Carol in a Thousand Cities*. In Aldrich's contribution to the collection, she wrote a scathing piece on the Daughters of Bilitis and the quality of *The Ladder* and an indirect response to the criticisms written by members of *The Ladder's* textual community.

Here it is appropriate to briefly comment on the role that archives have to play in the study of lesbian literary culture during the 1950s. Pulp fiction's status as disposable culture meant that these books were often unavailable in libraries, and the desire to collect pulp novels often originated with private collectors. For example, Barbara Grier, who was involved with the 'Lesbiana' column in *The Ladder* and eventually founded Niad Press in 1973, was an avid collector of gay and lesbian pulp fiction novels. Grier and others have placed intrinsic value on their collections. If it were not for private collectors saving their pulp novels, copies of *The Ladder* and other, 'lesbiana,' this project would not be possible.

The use of women's archives and special collections is significant to feminist and queer studies, especially in the context of pre-stonewall America. In *The Archival Turn in Feminism*,

Kate Eichhorn argues that archives have an integral role in the production of knowledge through the collection of feminist histories. She argues that while archives and special collections have been thought of as servants to scholars, the archival process can be seen as a site for the production and 'circulation of ideas, culture, and activism in the present.'⁸⁸ In Eichhorn's experience, the special collections of individuals often pairs previously associated texts and media together. However, my experience at the Bancroft Library and the GLBT Historical society was highly structured and monitored by archival staff. While conducting my original research on *The Ladder*, I examined thoroughly all surviving copies of the magazine through the use of a microfilm reader. I additionally had the privilege of accessing some of the original copies of *The Ladder*. The magazines were not stored in large boxes intermingled with other textual materials, but in filing boxes neatly separated and carefully cared for. These magazines were stored off site in a controlled facility, and a request had to be made to access them. If it were not for the donation of *personal* copies of lesbian pulps and copies of *The Ladder*, this project would have been considerably more difficult to undertake. The method of archival research has been vital to this thesis. In order to construct a lens through which to re-read lesbian pulps, I needed to comb through the magazine carefully to read and interpret the literary dialogue being held between their pages. This, the archival work has been pivotal to this project.

⁸⁸ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), p. 2.

4. Thesis Structure

The chapters of this thesis reflect the importance of *The Ladder* in identifying the existence of a lesbian textual community within a culture of conformity in pre-Stonewall America. While only two of the chapters cover *The Ladder* and the remaining three chapters discuss lesbian pulp fiction novels, the chapters are ordered in such a way so that Chapter One informs and provides context for Chapters Two, Three, and Four.

Chapter One closely examines the existence of a lesbian textual community, or the community surrounding *The Ladder*. This chapter uses Danielle Fuller's definition of textual communities as 'reading, writing, and publishing communities,' which 'enable the production of other types of writing.'⁸⁹ While Fuller's investigation into textual communities is geographically specific, this chapter maintains that geographic locations or boundaries are not required in the formation of a textual community. This defining and examination of *The Ladder*'s lesbian textual community serves to create a lens through which to read novels like Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952) and Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*. Before close reading the literary content of the magazine, the chapter contextualises the magazine by taking into account the historical and political environment in which the DOB and *The Ladder* were created. In an attempt to outline and assess the way in which *The Ladder* connected with readers, this chapter focuses on the 'Lesbiana' column and book reviews regularly published in the magazine and the creation of the DOB Book Service that was formed to help readers of lesbian-themed texts obtain reading materials. Moreover the chapter reveals the evaluative processes members of this LTC utilised when selecting reading materials.

⁸⁹ Danielle Fuller, *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), p.5.

Ultimately, the first chapter examines the format and politics of the lesbian textual community formed by *The Ladder*.

Chapter Two utilises close-reading techniques to re-evaluate Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952). While the work of Vin Packer/Ann Aldrich was heavily criticised by the DOB and *The Ladder* for her representation of lesbian in both her fiction and non-fiction works, is it possible to redeem the novel from the criticisms received in the late 1950s? Packer was under the pressure of her editor and the US Post Master to tell her story in a way that would allow it to pass inspection. I argue that the novel can be redeemed from history by locating potentially subversive messages in the text and through the way in which lesbian readers may have read the novel at the time of its publication.

Chapter Three focuses on the novel *Odd Girl Out* (1957) by Ann Bannon. This novel along with Bannon's enjoyed much success and a warm reception from lesbian readers of *The Ladder*. As a part of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, Bannon's first pulp novel has a secured place in lesbian literary history in the United States. This chapter views *Odd Girl Out* separately from the rest of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, as Bannon wrote her first novel without planning to write five more books in the series. Moreover, there are a few unintentional inconsistencies in her character histories between her first and second novels in the series. As the restrictions on printed material relaxed at the end of the 1950s, Bannon was able to portray lesbian relationships more candidly than they had appeared in *Spring Fire*. In this chapter, I explore the explicit ways in which Bannon examines the subject of female sexuality through the plot of her novel.

Finally, Chapter Four examines *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* and Bannon's representation of 1950s butch identity. In this chapter, I interrogate Bannon's idealised butch character,

Beebo Brinker. Across four novels – *I am a Woman* (1959), *Women in The Shadows* (1959), *Journey to a Woman* (1963), and *Beebo Brinker* (1963) – Bannon developed a character that reflected one interpretation of ‘butchness’ within the 1950s and 1960s cultural landscape of urban lesbian bar culture. While Bannon conducted ‘research’ into the lesbian bar scene in Greenwich Village, her interpretation of butchness invites an interrogation of Beebo’s butch identity and its adherence to popularised butch stereotypes. The chapter utilises Judith Butler’s concepts of gender performativity and Judith Halberstam’s research into female masculinity to interpret the popularised image of butchness as represented in Bannon’s lesbian paperbacks. The chapter also addresses the reader-reception of Bannon’s lesbian readers in the 1950s and 1960s; using the criticisms of butch/femme disseminated through *The Ladder* and the DOB’s anti-butch/femme representational politics, the chapter addresses the popularity of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* and Beebo’s status as a butch icon.

In all, through this thesis, I aim to ascertain and describe one example of a pre-Stonewall lesbian textual community (LTC). In their very nature, textual communities are often fluid and overlapping, meaning that I cannot claim that there was only one lesbian textual community in the United States between 1950 and 1969. What I am able to achieve through my research is to document and detail one that did exist via the publication of *The Ladder*. Through a detailed analysis of this LTC this thesis is able to form a lens through which pro-lesbian pulps can be academically evaluated utilising close reading. What this method makes clear is that pro-lesbians pulps were able to communicate subversive commentary on 1950s and 1960s conceptions about gender, sex, and sexuality. This thesis thus contributes to the historical re-evaluation of 1950s conformist culture by complicating the simplistic and nostalgic view of the 1950s as a *simpler time* in American History.

Chapter One

Establishing a Lens for Reading Lesbian Pulp Fiction and *The Ladder's* Textual Community

This chapter reviews the lesbian textual community (LTC) present in *The Ladder* in order to form a lens through which lesbian pulp fiction can be read and re-evaluated. I achieve this by closely reading the literary content of this magazine – the only lesbian magazine published in the United States at the time. In examining book reviews, the Daughters of Bilitis Book Service, and the ‘Readers Respond’ column, we can begin to understand the evaluative process that lesbian readers may have participated in during the post-WWII / pre-Stonewall era. In analysing this specific LTC, we can begin to comprehend how lesbians may have obtained lesbian-themed reading materials or *Lesbiana*. Moreover, from reading *The Ladder*, we can see how lesbian pulp fiction books were regarded: were the readers and editors of *The Ladder* concerned with the quality of their reading materials? *The Ladder* has previously been examined as a tool for the political and social organisation of the Daughters of Bilitis

(DOB), and as a means of communication among lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s;¹ however, *The Ladder* has yet to be investigated on literary terms. In other words, as a lesbian periodical, *The Ladder* has yet to be investigated on its merits as a part of a reading and writing LTC. In thus identifying *The Ladder's* LTC this chapter poses and answers the question: how does the lens of this specific LTC change the way lesbian pulp fiction can be evaluated through close reading? To answer this question, an understanding of prior scholarship in magazines and groups of readers must be taken into consideration.

It has often been the case – historically speaking – that periodicals and genre fiction have not been taken seriously within academia. In more recent years, the works of Ellen McCracken and Margaret Beetham have examined women's magazines and feminist periodicals in an attempt to give academic credit to mass media. Additionally, the works of Janice Radway, Elizabeth Long, Danielle Fuller, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo examine groups of readers (in various forms), giving credence to the social aspects and the value of reading. What the collective works of these authors have in common is the belief that academia has

¹ Kristin G Esterberg, 'From Accommodation to Liberation: A Social Movement Analysis of Lesbians in the Homophile Movement,' *Gender and Society*, 8.3, (1994), 424-43; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority: 1940- 1970*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), And 'A Queer and Contested Medium: The Emergence of Representational Politics in "The Golden Age" of Lesbian Paperbacks, 1955-1963,' *Journal of Women's History*, 17.1 (Spring 2005), 165-188; Marcia M Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006); Manuela Soares, 'The Purloined Ladder: It's place in Lesbian History,' in *Gay and Lesbian Literature Since World War II* ed. Sonya L Jones. (New York: The Harrington Park Press 1998), 27-49.

mistakenly excluded popular textual media and its readers from academic study. Moreover, each author has paid close attention to the forms of media accessed by *women*, and how women interact with textual material.

In *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (1993) Ellen McCracken notes how the theories of Roland Barthes and Frederic Jameson have been integral to 'relaxing the traditionally strict barriers between the study of high and mass culture.'² The past elitism of academic studies has been a limiting factor in the field of literary studies. Magazines, for example, have much to offer as sites of cultural, historical, and literary analysis. As McCracken argues, 'Magazines addressed to women are one such mass cultural form –a multi-million dollar business which presents pleasurable, value-laden semiotic systems to immense numbers of women.'³ In other words, women's magazines function as communicative tools for women, perhaps most notably as a means of communicating images and messages of femininity to female (and arguably male) readers. As Margaret Beetham notes in her introduction to *A Magazine of her Own: Domesticity and desire in the woman's magazine, 1800-1914*, women's magazines have long addressed their readers in terms of their gender identity:

Throughout history the woman's magazine has defined its readers 'as women.' It has taken their gender as axiomatic. Yet that femininity is always represented in the magazines as fractured, not least because it is simultaneously assumed as given and as still to be achieved. Becoming the woman you are is a difficult project for which the magazine has characteristically provided recipes, patterns, narratives and models of the self [...] For the magazine has historically offered not only to pattern the reader's gender identity but to address her desire.⁴

² Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914*, (Routledge: London, 1996), p.1.

McCracken and Beetham have examined women's magazines from contemporary culture and historical culture, respectively. In both their works, they have viewed the commercial magazine as a means of addressing women's desires in ways that are identifiably feminine.⁵ Moreover, magazines, as commercial products, are 'deeply involved in capitalist production and consumption as well as circulating in the cultural economy of collective meanings and constructing an identity for the individual reader as a gendered and sexual being.'⁶ However, while their work on commercial magazines has been valuable to the study of popular or 'low' cultural forms, their evaluations do not make allowances for non-commercial magazines, like *The Ladder*, or other not-for-profit publications that existed (for a time) alongside periodicals like *Ms. Magazine* and *Mademoiselle*.

In the formative *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), Janice Radway discusses the impact that reading romance fiction has on (heterosexual) women living in the rural town of 'Smithton.'⁷ According to Radway, 'Romance reading supplements the avenues traditionally open to women for emotional gratification by supplying them vicariously with the attention and nurturance they do not get enough of in the round of day-to-day existence.'⁸ In other words, the act of reading romance novels – even novels that perpetuate heteropatriarchal relationship structures – the act allows women to momentarily escape the duties of marriage and motherhood, and to emotionally recharge. Moreover, reading romance fiction gives the subjects of her study – middle-class housewives

⁵ That is to say: identifiably feminine in a Western heteropatriarchal context.

⁶ Ibid., p.2.

⁷ Smithton is the fictional name of the town where Radway conducted her study.

⁸ Janice A Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. (Cape Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.212.

in rural communities – access to ‘a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other.’⁹ The female (reading) community described by Radway ‘is mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing.’¹⁰ Implicitly, Radway is arguing that distance is not a limiting factor when defining a community of readers. In fact, the act of reading can compensate for physical distances placed between readers (and authors). Ultimately, Radway’s analysis questions the idea that reading is an activity that isolates its participants. Whilst Radway’s case study examined the reading practice of heterosexual women readers, her theories about the positive effect of romance fiction on readers is applicable in the analysis of lesbian reading practices. As I will show in this chapter and in those that follow, *The Ladder* and certain lesbian pulp novels acted as sources for lesbian identification when there were little to no resources available to do so. Moreover, I will show that Vin Packer’s *Spring Fire* (1952) and Ann Bannon’s pro-lesbian pulps were actively and critically read by lesbian readers at the time. As survival literature, pulps became a means of connection and expression for authors and readers.

Elizabeth Long’s *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003) also examines ways in which reading becomes a communal experience. According to Long, the concept that reading is an isolated practice is an historically established construct. In an analysis of Christian art, Long’s critique highlights how reading has been presented as sacred and scholarly – devoid of pleasure or entertainment. Moreover, the reader has been represented as participating in a privileged activity; only those who have the privilege of leisure, the wealthy and educated classes, had the ability and time to read. In Long’s words, ‘Understanding reading as a wholly solitary activity locates it securely in the realm of private

⁹ Ibid, p.97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

life. This is problematic because of pervasive assumptions in social science that there exists a strict opposition between public and private life and that significant social development occurs mainly within the public realm.¹¹ Ultimately, it is necessary to rethink reading as an isolated act. While the act of reading a book may be a solitary activity, arriving at the decision to read a specific title, and the thoughts a reader has after reading said book (or magazine), are not experienced in isolation. The interaction between reader and text has extended beyond the practice of reading and into the everyday through book circles, reviews, and other means of discussing and disseminating reading materials.

Danielle Fuller's *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada* is an investigation into how and why a community forms around reading, writing, and publishing. According to Fuller, 'literary work takes place within a series of interconnected textual communities, or reading, writing, and publishing communities. Different kinds of texts are created within these networks, and these, in turn, enable the production of other types of writing.'¹² Fuller's research, which is geographically specific to Newfoundland, examines the ways in which groups of women writers have participated in their respective and intersecting textual communities to record and share their experiences of 'often painful issues, such as racism, poverty, and domestic violence.'¹³ These concerns and traumas become shared through the textual community and thus extend beyond the assumedly solitary practice of reading. Fuller's research provides a workable definition of 'textual communities' for my assessment of *The Ladder*. While Fuller's research is geographically

¹¹ Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.16.

¹² Danielle Fuller, *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), p.5.

¹³ Fuller, p.3.

specific to Newfoundland, my research into *The Ladder* does not encompass a clearly defined geographical space. Furthermore, as Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo discuss in *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mass Reading Events and film and television adaptations of popular fiction illustrate how in the present, reading is a social act. In their words, ‘even solitary reading can be understood as a social practice because the action of reading always takes place somewhere, whether in what we discern to be a domestic and private space such as the home, or in a public space like a library or on a bus.’¹⁴ In the age of mass-produced magazines and paperback novels – and especially in the present era of eReaders and electronic books – readers are not isolated in their individual reading experience. The readers read the same book (or periodical) as potentially countless others. The discussions held about ‘what to read next’ and ‘what to avoid reading’ in a pre-digital age within the pages of newsletters and magazines is a promising point of inquiry into textual communities that existed in earlier decades. In investigating historical textual communities, it becomes possible to gain an understanding of the reading habits of people living within a certain time and place in history. More specifically, through reading *The Ladder* and using the book reviews and reader letters published in the magazine, we can gain a better understanding of how lesbian women engaged with and responded to representations of themselves in textual media.

In the first section of this chapter, I identify a working definition of community and textual community from which to regard the DOB and *The Ladder*’s LTC. In the second section, I briefly discuss *The Ladder*’s history to provide historical context for my analysis. In the third section, I examine the scope of the ‘Lesbian’ column and DOB Book Service to detail and

¹⁴ Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2013).

describe the lesbian themed reading materials disseminated through *The Ladder*. In the fourth section, I closely read the 'Readers Respond' column in order to provide a detailed account of the literary discussions published through the magazine.

1. What is a lesbian textual community?

Before I can discuss the shape and form of *The Ladder's* lesbian textual community, I must discuss the definition of community (in discussing lesbian communities) within the context of my own work. In attempting to formulate and discover definitions applicable to lesbian community formation in the 1950s and 1960s, it was pertinent to investigate and interrogate popular sociological thought in the United States at the time. I turned specifically to the field of sociology to find a definition of community contemporary with the 1950s and 1960s and appropriate to an American social context. In doing so, it was my goal to reconstruct how community was theorised at the time the DOB formed and my primary texts were published. Through reading the works of August Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel – all of whom heavily influenced the sociological field – and further reading feminist critics of sociological practices, I wished to address the history of ideas surrounding community consciousness in pre-Stonewall America. In other words, under 1950s and 1960s definitions of community, could lesbian groups self-identify as communities, and would this definition be applicable to *The Ladder's* community of readers?

Through my research, I learned that the ways in which sociologists theorised and analysed communities were heavily focused on the study of family units in which the 'father' or male head of household was assumed to be the source of economic income. This family-focused, heterocentric definition of community excludes groups of individuals who do not fit into the

middle-class ideal of the nuclear family, and it marginalises their experience from sociological study. Thus, the existence of lesbian groups and groups of other marginalised individuals were rendered invisible to sociological consideration. In short, within the sociological assumptions popularised in the 1950s and 1960s, there was no lesbian community. However as the documented existence of groups like the Daughters of Bilitis prove, lesbian communities did exist, meaning a definition of community contemporary to the publication of *The Ladder* and lesbian paperbacks is unsatisfactory and short-sighted.

To form a working definition of community for my research I have examined sociological theory through the lens of feminism, consulting *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives* (Abbot and Wallace, 1990), *Engendering the Social: Feminist Encounters with Sociological Theory* (Marshall and Witz, 2004), and *Sexual Politics* (Millet, 1970), along with selected articles on feminism and sociology.¹⁵ From these readings, I learned that the theories of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel are significant for their foundational work in sociology, and historically pertinent to understanding the development of sociological thought. Yet, when addressing issues of gender, the theories of these men become inadequate when describing that which lies outside of normative concepts of gender. Feminist sociological thought problematises the way the 'founding fathers' of sociology

¹⁵ Pamela Abbot and Claire Wallace, *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 1990); Joan Alway, "The Trouble with Gender: Tales of the Still-Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociological Theory." *Sociological Theory* 13.3 (1995), 209-28; Janet Saltzman Chafetz, "Feminist Theory and Sociology: Underutilized Contributions for Mainstream Theory," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23.1 (1997): 97-120; Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, "The Community of Practice: Theories and Methodologies in Language and Gender Research," in *Language in Society*, 28.2, (1999), 173-83; Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

treated gender, highlighting not only normative gender ideals, but Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality.'¹⁶ Compulsory heterosexuality not only creates bias within mainstream (or 'malestream') sociology, but also inflects the feminist theory that questions it. Just as mainstream sociological theory has a history of ignoring feminist theory,¹⁷ so too does feminist theory have a history of ignoring or misappropriating lesbian experience. Taking up Rich's argument, Margaret Cruikshank (1986) defends feminism so long as it meets Rich's conditions: 'feminism is ideology enough for lesbians, provided that it incorporates an understanding of heterosexism.'¹⁸ Sadly, from her experience in women's studies of the time, the field was not a 'safe or welcoming place' for lesbians.¹⁹ From my own academic experience as a student, I cannot safely say that much has changed since then. Lesbian experience was neither discussed nor incorporated into survey courses on literature written in English during my undergraduate degree. Any reason attributed to the perpetuation of lesbian invisibility is merely a conjecture. Academics may feel uncomfortable theorising or teaching about lesbian existence – at best it is because they lack the expertise and feel they could not do the topic justice; at worse it is due to prejudice. Cruikshank put it poetically: 'If you picture the university as a castle surrounded by a moat, lesbian studies is the band of archers beyond the moat, firing arrows in the air and seeing them fall harmlessly to earth. The lords of the castle know we are out there. They want us to go away. But the castle is in

¹⁶ Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 631-60.

¹⁷ Chafetz..

¹⁸ Margaret Cruikshank, "Looking Back on Lesbian Studies," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 8.3 (1986), 107-09, p.109

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.108.

no imminent danger of being stormed.'²⁰ If the castle has yet to be stormed over thirty years later, perhaps heavier artillery is needed.

Simply incorporating lesbians under the sign 'woman' is not enough for theorists, such as Cheshire Calhoun. In 'The Gender Closet: Lesbian Disappearance Under the Sign "Woman"' (1995), Calhoun argues that she finds that the feminist theorisation of the lesbian is a 'problem.' For Calhoun, anti-essentialism and 'feminist values and goals have worked against representing lesbian difference.'²¹ Working from Wittig's theory of lesbians as 'the third sex,' Calhoun notes that lesbian incorporation into feminism is not possible if lesbians are 'outside' the man/woman binary: 'Positioned in a line-up of womanly differences in race, class, and so forth, lesbian difference cannot appear. In short, "'women" may operate as a lesbian closet.'²² Through Calhoun's article, we can see just how difficult it has been to establish a solid theory of lesbian identity. There has been much debate about what a lesbian is and isn't, and how she fits into varying theories of sexuality. Feminism fails her on the grounds that she is not heterosexual,²³ and queer theory fails her due to the fact that it glorifies traits associated with masculinity.²⁴ 'The lesbian' exists in a state of historical ambiguity; according to Calhoun, this comes from the medical and psychiatric origins of lesbian identity. Calhoun argues, '[lesbian's] ambiguous status reflects not only the relatively recent invention of the lesbian but also the

²⁰ Ibid., p.107.

²¹ Cheshire Calhoun "The Gender Closet: Lesbian Disappearance under the Sign "Women"" *Feminist Studies* 21.1 (1995), 7-34, p. 7.

²² Ibid, pp.8-9.

²³ Rich.

²⁴ Kathy Rudy, "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory." *Feminist Studies*, 27.1 (2001), 190-222.

absence today of consensus on any single definition of what it means to be a lesbian.’²⁵ So, between (or outside) the woman-identified woman and the difference-identified woman lies an image of ‘the lesbian,’ buried in theory and academic assumptions. Even as I work to define ‘community’ in a non-heteropatriarchal context, I risk obscuring the theorised lesbian even further. Nevertheless, it is important for my work to conceptualise definitions of *community*, *lesbian community*, and *lesbian textual community*.

An overall focus on the heteropatriarchal family in sociological study, in addition to the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on the sociological schools in the United States, leads to heterosexist definitions of community.²⁶ In sociological studies after 1900, definitions of community become gender-dependent when conceived of in mainstream sociological thought.²⁷ For an examination of lesbian community, this heteropatriarchal view – a view focused on the image of the 1950s nuclear family — would lead to warped interpretations of community structure. On its own, mainstream sociological thought (especially the theory popularised in the 1950s) is simply inadequate because, whether intended or not, there is an implicit denial of the lesbian community as a *community*.

Lesbian communities have often been viewed through a heteropatriarchal lens, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. One example of a heteropatriarchal viewpoint of the lesbian community appears in William Simon and John H Gagnon’s article, ‘Femininity in the

²⁵ Calhoun, pp.20-21.

²⁶ Kate Millet. *Sexual Politics*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970.)

²⁷ See August B Hollingshead, "Community Research: Development and Present Condition," *American Sociological Review*, 13.2, (1948), 136-56; Bert N Adams, "Interaction Theory and the Social Network," *Sociometry*, 30.1, (1967), 64-78; Frederick L Bates and Lloyd Bacon, "The Community as a Social System," *Social Forces*, 50.3, (1972), 371-79; and Claude S Fischer, "The Study of Urban Community and Personality," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1.1 (1975), 67-89.

Lesbian Community' (1967). Asking their readers to suspend moral reservations about homosexuality for the sake of sociological inquiry, Simon and Gagnon appear to give the lesbian community validation through use of the label 'community' as applied to lesbian groups. However, the image they portray of the lesbian community is not necessarily a positive one. Intermixed with denouncements of lesbian sexual identity are acknowledgements that ignoring the lesbian community in academic study may be to the detriment of studying socialisation processes: 'The lesbian represents an excellent example of the need to integrate our understanding of both deviant and conventional developmental processes.'²⁸ Working from 'exceedingly thin scientific literature' — namely the work of Alfred Kinsey — Simon and Gagnon do not claim that their work will be completely accurate, but they hope that it will provide a groundwork for further study on the lesbian community. Their study functions like a backhanded compliment, allowing the lesbian community form, and asserting that female homosexual behaviour is analogous to female heterosexual behaviour, but simultaneously perpetuating the prejudice of the time. In other words, it grants the lesbian community recognition while participating in the rhetoric of medicalised homosexuality and the social ostricisation of homosexual individuals. The benefit of their findings appears to be the denial of the level of 'abnormality' in female homosexual behaviour; both homosexual and heterosexual women learn to repress their sexuality as part of 'learning to be female' in Western society. This sociological perspective differs from a historically held medical and social opinion that marginalised lesbians, placing them into the category of 'sexual deviant' and 'invert'.²⁹

²⁸ William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "Femininity in the Lesbian Community." *Social Problems* 15.2 (1967), 212-21, pp.213-214.

²⁹ Ibid., pp.213-214; pp.214-215; p.216.

Reference to the ‘othering’ of lesbians is made in many lesbian pulp novels and in novels like *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall. In these novels, lesbian characters like Hall’s Stephen Gordon and Ann Bannon’s titular Beebo Brinker are described as perverse inverters because they are masculine in appearance. While Simon and Gagnon resist the outright condemnation of lesbians, if they were arguing from a feminist perspective they would use the similarity in female heterosexual and homosexual behaviour to highlight the inequality in heteropatriarchal societies; in other words, the inequality of societies in which heterosexual men hold power over women. Yet they continue to present female sexual repression as a benefit: ‘lesbians should be better able to resist relations that involve sexual exchange without any emotional investment.’³⁰ What Simon and Gagnon achieve through their investigation is not liberating for lesbians, nor is it liberating for heterosexual women. Their implicit suggestion is that sexual repression in women is valuable to society.

Simon and Gagnon also place responsibility for the lesbian community’s image on their outward appearance.³¹ These are of course massive presumptions on Simon and Gagnon’s part. What is ‘naturally’ feminine and ‘naturally’ masculine have subsequently been contested by feminism; for example, in Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970). They are social constructions and must be interrogated as such: who defines what is masculine and what is feminine? If it is society as a whole, does majority sentiment, influenced by history and tradition, make one particular definition of masculinity and femininity more valid than another? Simon and Gagnon claim their work ‘is an attempt to demonstrate that an understanding of homosexuality can only follow from an understanding of sexuality itself.’³²

³⁰ Ibid., p.219.

³¹ Ibid., p.220.

³² Ibid., p.220-221

I agree that a better understanding of human sexuality is beneficial to many fields of study, but it is necessary that it be utilised in a manner that does not create hierarchies of sexuality grounded in difference. While their paper has helped to increase lesbian visibility, the paper seems more hurtful than helpful to lesbian studies. Their work clearly caters, inadvertently or not, to a heterocentric construction of sociology. Certainly, Simon and Gagnon support the study of the lesbian community, but they do so in a manner that is more in service to a warped curiosity than to developing true understanding and acceptance of ‘deviant’ communities.

As Simon and Gagnon themselves note, there was little published work on lesbian communities in the 1950s and 1960s; therefore, a slightly anachronistic approach has to be taken to apply a more satisfactory concept of community to the reading/writing community revolving around lesbian pulp fiction during that period. I will have to rely on theories of community and female-centred space articulated during and after the civil rights movement to further develop a non-heteropatriarchal sense of community. There is no doubt that lesbians occupied their own community (or multiple communities) in the 1950s and ‘60s, for they formed a proto-political group that could not (or would not) identify with the heterosexual world around them. In the forward of *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction 1949-1969*, Ann Bannon points out that merely the covers of lesbian pulps ‘provided links among members of a wide-flung and incohesive community’; even if this community did not identify itself, it still existed thanks to a textual connection.³³ Physically lesbians may have been confined to specific neighbourhoods — for example: Greenwich Village in New York, as described in Ann Bannon’s *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* and in Ann Aldrich’s *We Walk Alone* (1955)—or hidden as individuals in rural communities they could not completely identify with.

³³ Jaye Zimet, *Strange Sisters*. (New York, NY: Viking Studio, 1999), p.13.

Regardless, they were still able to form a community centred around reading lesbian fiction and lesbian periodicals. To develop a theoretical framework for thinking about lesbian community it is thus necessary to examine the work of lesbian separatist groups, like The Furies and Radicalesbians that formed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Politically minded groups of lesbian separatists in the 1970s questioned heterosexual assumptions of community and sought to redefine *community*, and community ethics and practices, to satisfy their own needs. More recent studies have been done detailing the history of lesbian (and feminist) community. In 'Living a Feminist Lifestyle: The Intersection of Theory and Action in a Lesbian Feminist Collective' (2002) Anne M Valk describes how The Furies (1972) attempted to make feminist theory function in a working community: having limited interaction 'with some men and women of colour,' The Furies were made up of 'a small number of white lesbian feminists' who participated in communal living in addition to working with one another.³⁴ The end goal was to distance 'themselves from what they perceived as a hostile world in order to analyze their experiences as women, question their own principles and assumptions, and subsequently develop a base from which they could mobilize other women for social change.'³⁵ Although the group only lasted from 1971 to 1972, The Furies have been influential due to the fact that they kept extensive records of their experiences in the collective. The collective's dissolution came from the difficulties they faced in trying to marry political theory and personal practice: 'the collective's long-term goal of creating a mass movement was undermined by the complications of trying to connect

³⁴ Anne M Valk, "Living a Feminist Lifestyle: The Intersection of Theory and Action in a Lesbian Feminist Collective," *Feminist Studies*, 28.2 (2002), 303-332, p.303.

³⁵ Ibid.

personal and political lives, by making theory and action conform.’³⁶ Like The Furies, Radicalesbians – ‘a New York-based group that predated the Furies’³⁷ have become historically famous through their publication of their pamphlet, ‘Woman-Identified Woman’ (1970)—also sought to make feminism and lesbianism function as a part of their daily lives.

Through their political work, the Radicalesbians attempted to bring lesbian existence into feminism as more than a ‘lavender herring’ – or in other words, their standpoint was that the lesbian question was more than just a distraction from working against heteropatriarchal societal structures. Rather, they argued that the lesbian perspective was integral to confronting the heteronormative ontology of ‘woman’, ‘lesbian’, and the ‘male grid of role definitions.’ . Like Adrienne Rich after them, Radicalesbians believed that the lesbian experience and lesbian issues also belonged to all women. Words like ‘dyke’ and male-conceived ideas of womanhood act as a means to keep a woman ‘separate from her sisters’ in order to keep the heteropatriarchal family at the centre of her life.³⁸ In simply ‘seeking acceptability for women’s liberation’ through the denial of lesbianism, Radicalesbians argued that women merely played to the established heteropatriarchal system, and would ultimately fail to gain equality. The only way women will truly gain autonomy (psychologically) is if women ‘begin disengaging from male defined response patterns’ (1970). True female (and lesbian) freedom thus comes from looking to oneself and not to male culture for definition and approval. The alternative for women is an existence marked by self-hate through internalised male culture. The solution, they suggest, is creating a sense of self that comes from within and from other women: ‘Only women can give to each other a new sense of self.

³⁶ Ibid., p.305.

³⁷ Ibid., p.304.

³⁸ Rita Mae Brown, “The Woman-Identified Woman,” in *The Ladder*, 14.11-12 (August-September 1970), 6-8.

That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men.’³⁹

The path to redefined ‘womanhood’ comes from self-validation, self-reinforcement, and self-authentication. ‘With that real self, with that consciousness, we begin a revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression.’⁴⁰ Self-defining practices and forming separatist communes became a part of an increasingly politicised lesbian identity. Through reclaiming lesbianism and the identity of lesbian from a heterosexist paradigm, self-identified lesbians (and heterosexual women) were able to take agency away from a medical and social label that previously marked them as marginalised individuals. Removing oneself from the heteropatriarchal social equation was one method of resistance.

While these groups did not outlive the 1970s, the act of attempting to find a non-heteropatriarchal method of organising community called into question the very structure of mainstream society. This form of protest and alternative lifestyle extended into consumer practices, as some groups of lesbians attempted to live outside of a heterocentric consumer culture. Heather Murray details this attempt by lesbians to engage in cultural production outside of a patriarchal, capitalist economy. According to Murray, the study of consumer culture in a lesbian/gay context is valuable because of the way that ‘consumer culture always reveals qualities about selfhood and identity.’⁴¹ This is more ‘striking’ when studying lesbian and gay consumer culture, for consumer markers of identity ‘were fragments of an often hidden identity. In the case of lesbian feminism, these cues helped to shape an identity bound

³⁹ Ibid., p.8.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Heather Murray, "Free for All Lesbians: Lesbian Cultural Production and Consumption in the United States during the 1970s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 16.2, (2007), 251-75, p.255.

up with introspection and self-meditation.’⁴² Murray argues that the expression of lesbian values ‘through production and consumption’ was able to ‘provide a sense of lesbian space, culture and politics.’ Moreover, lesbian cultural production and consumption ‘reflected a desire for comfort, community, and even protection.’⁴³ Because *lesbianism* became more than sexual orientation in 1970s feminist politics— a choice made by those following certain feminist politics – making the decision to purchase from and produce for one’s ‘lesbian sisters’ became a highly politically charged economic decision.

The method of connecting producers and consumers came through periodicals and newsletters, such as *Lesbian Connection*: ‘Started in the early 1970s in East Lansing, Michigan, this periodical had a circulation of five to ten thousand copies bimonthly, making it the lesbian periodical with perhaps the largest number of readers of its time. As a general stance, the *Lesbian Connection*, which was "free for all lesbians," characterized its readership as financially pinched.’⁴⁴ In an age before the internet, the circulation of newsletters and periodicals became valuable components of identity and community formation for lesbians, as they fostered connections among individuals who may have been isolated from one another. The functionality of epistolary distributions thus allows us to question the validity of the assumption that community must exist in a ‘geographically determinable’ space.⁴⁵ Participating in lesbian cultural production was not just an economic decision, but an ethical one. Murray asserts that the economic decisions of some lesbians translated into ‘looking out

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p.253.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.262.

⁴⁵ Frederick L Bates and Lloyd Bacon, "The Community as a Social System." *Social Forces* 50.3 (1972): 371-79, p.371.

for one another financially.⁴⁶ Thus, this economic behaviour defines the epistolary network surrounding *Lesbian Connection* as a community. Moreover, this functioning community, as a political entity, exemplifies the 'expanded meanings of lesbian feminism during the 1970s.'⁴⁷ Murray concludes that lesbian cultural production served as a response 'to women who were dissatisfied not only with heterosexuality and patriarchy but with nine-to-five jobs, with the commodification of art, with many of the features of contemporary daily life.'⁴⁸ By participating in an alternative economy, the lesbian community of the 1970s was able to investigate how to practice aspects of lesbian feminist theory without entirely separating from heteropatriarchal society in the same way that *The Furies* did. Thus through the analysis of 1970s lesbian magazines, Murray sets a precedent for identifying lesbian community groups outside of heteropatriarchal ideology. While utilising Murray's work may initially seem ahistorical, there exists a genealogy between the DOB and the lesbian feminist groups of the 1970s. In other words, the DOB can be seen as a predecessor to lesbian feminist groups, and *The Ladder* a foremother to 1970s lesbian periodicals, thus allowing for the application of feminist definitions of community to be useful in investigating pre-Stonewall lesbian communities.

According to Gretchen Schultz in 'Daughters of Bilitis: Literary Genealogy and Lesbian Authenticity' (2001), 'The DOB sought belonging [...] and authenticity [...] yet they allowed an objectifying male voice to name them' by taking their name from Pierre Louÿs' *Les Chansons*

⁴⁶ Murray, p.263.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.274.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

de Bilitis.⁴⁹ In the context of homosexual and communist persecution of the McCarthy Era it was perhaps necessary for the DOB to '[sacrifice] lesbian sexuality to protect its members.'⁵⁰ While the actions of homophile organisations seem lack-lustre in comparison to their successors in the gay civil rights movement, groups like the DOB and their publications show substantial proof of community formation around a readership. Like *Lesbian Connection*, *The Ladder* connected readers to information relevant to lesbian interests at the time (i.e., articles discussing religious, legal, and social concerns). Not only did *The Ladder* function as a means of organising members of the DOB across the United States, but it disseminated information about lesbian-themed literature ('lesbiana') to lesbian readers. As I discuss later in this chapter, readers were able to develop connections with authors (directly and indirectly) and discuss issues surrounding the representation of lesbians in commercially produced written material.

This phenomenon of literary-focused discussion is what is referred to as *textual community*. Much like the definition of 'community,' the definition of 'textual community' has its roots within heteropatriarchal ideologies. The *Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology, 1450-2000* defines 'textual community' as follows:

[...] a place or social circle where manuscript texts are or were produced, read, and circulated by and for certain groups of people. Medieval examples include monasteries, convents, and abbeys where there was a scriptorium producing copies of religious texts for restricted communal use. Other examples extending into the early modern period, include certain households, usually aristocratic or gentrified, where manuscripts were written for a limited circle of family and

⁴⁹ Gretchen Schultz, "Daughters of Bilitis: Literary Genealogy and Lesbian Authenticity." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7.3 (2001), 377-89, p.382.

⁵⁰ Schultz, p.385.

friends; universities and colleges, where groups of students produced, copied, and exchanged texts of various kinds [...] Such communities might not necessarily be confined to one place of geographical area, however.⁵¹

It is important to acknowledge this definition, though I would adjust or simplify the definition for the purposes of my study. This particular definition confined the term 'textual community' within the context of medieval religious institutions, the ivory tower of academia, and the parlours of the upper class elite. With respect to the original coinage of the term, when using 'textual community' in a post-modern context, it becomes more constructive to discard the condition that a textual community must occupy one or multiple physical or geographic places. The lesbian textual community encompassed by *The Ladder* defies the condition that a textual community must take up a physical presence beyond the physicality of the document. Women from across the United States, and indeed across the globe, participated in *The Ladder's* textual community through their individual interactions with the magazine.

2. A Brief History of *The Ladder*

Before conducting a close reading of *The Ladder*, it is important to take into account the historical and political environment in which *The Ladder* was created. Moreover, it is important to account for the history of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) and for their overall motivations for creating a lesbian periodical. In reviewing the history of *The Ladder* and the

⁵¹ Peter Beal, *Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology, 1450 to 2000*. (Oxford, GBR: Oxford University Press, 2007), ProQuest ebrary. Web. 6 November 2015.

DOB, it becomes possible to identify the core demographic of this particular lesbian community and subsequently the demographic makeup of *The Ladder's* readership. In creating a lens through which to evaluate lesbian pulp fiction, credence must be paid to the likely identities and experiences of pre-Stonewall lesbian readers of lesbian paperback novels.

In September 1955, Rose Bamberg contacted Phyllis Lyon and her partner, Del Martin, about forming a social group for lesbians as an alternative to lesbian bars. In the only comprehensive history on the DOB, Marcia M. Gallo notes that four couples — Mary and Noni, June and Marcia, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, and Rose Bamberg and Rosemary — made plans for starting the group ‘over drinks and dinner’ on a Friday, in September 1955.⁵² The group of eight women held the first official DOB meeting on October 19, 1955. According to Gallo, while visiting gay- and lesbian-friendly bars in the San Francisco Bay Area was ‘fine, within limits,’ such visits carried their own set of dangers. According to John D’Emilio, ‘As gay subculture took root in twentieth-century American cities police invoked laws against disorderly conduct, vagrancy, public lewdness, assault and solicitation in order to haul in their victims.’⁵³ In certain cases, patrons of gay and lesbian bars would be arrested because of their attire; laws required that men and women had to wear at least three items of clothing befitting their gender.⁵⁴ Because of the dangers associated with lesbian bars at the time, the founding members of the DOB were attracted to the concept of a safer social space. In Gallo’s words, ‘They envisioned a comfortable environment in which they could talk, drink, dance, and dine, without paying high-prices for watered-down cocktails or worrying about whether

⁵² Marcia M Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006)., p.3.

⁵³ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority: 1940-1970*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.14.

⁵⁴ *Before Stonewall*, dir. Greta Schiller, (First Run Features, 1985) [On DVD].

this was the night ABC or the vice squad would arrive, sending everyone into a panic.’⁵⁵ The creation of an alternative space became very important to the DOB; however, even the founding members felt that their group should provide more than a casual space for lesbians to connect with other lesbians.⁵⁶

In the wake of McCarthyism, the Red Scare, and Executive Order 10450, homosexual men and women had to conceal their sexual identity. As the documentary, *Before Stonewall* details, middle-class homosexual men and women were under immense pressure to keep their sexual identity hidden from friends and family. Gay bars in metropolitan areas like New York and San Francisco were subject to frequent raids. One interviewee recalls how in some cases the names of the arrested patrons would appear in the newspapers the next day. Evidence of the oppressive fear felt by homosexuals also appears in *The Ladder’s* ‘Readers Respond’ column. Under the pseudonym ‘Sterling Monahan,’ a woman from Houston Texas highlights the difficulties faced by ‘silent’ homosexuals in the 1960s.⁵⁷ The letter was written in response to the article ‘The Homosexual Identity’ by author James Colton.⁵⁸ In her letter, ‘Sterling’ refutes Colton’s claims that hiding one’s homosexual identity from friends, family, and co-workers is ‘not necessary.’⁵⁹ According to Sterling, while Colton enjoyed certain freedoms as a male homosexual writer, she could not reveal her sexual identity to others: ‘Let’s be realistic. I’m a single woman working for the government [...] The government

⁵⁵ Gallo, p.3.

⁵⁶ Gallo, p.4.

⁵⁷ Sterling Monahan, ‘Readers Respond,’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 13.3-4, (December 1968/January 1969), 38.

⁵⁸ James Coulton, ‘The Homosexual Identity’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 12.11-12, (September 1968), 4-8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.5.

controls my income and I could lose my job if my homosexual identity were discovered.’⁶⁰ Accounts like those in *Before Stonewall* and *The Ladder* help to illustrate the impact of the institutionalised discrimination faced by homosexual men and women before the Gay Liberation movement. While there were a few exceptions, for the most part, gay men and women lived in constant fear of discovery.

This need for discretion and secrecy reflected on the decision to name the group, ‘The Daughters of Bilitis.’ The name ‘Bilitis’ originates from Pierre Louy’s 1894 *Songs of Bilitis*, depicting the imagined lover of Sappho. According to Gallo, ‘Daughters of Bilitis was a vague enough name [...] that if asked about it, members could claim to belong to something as benign as a woman’s lodge or a Greek poetry club.’⁶¹ The first year of the DOB’s existence was marked by disputes over the purpose and goals of the group, ‘some of [the Daughters] wanted only to have a place to socialize with other lesbians; others wanted to mix socializing with social action.’⁶² Eventually, only Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin remained as the founding members.⁶³ Despite the initial difficulties, the DOB gained additional members and in June 1956, they agreed on a statement of purpose which would be printed in *The Ladder* for as long as the magazine was affiliated with the DOB (see Figure 1.1).⁶⁴ As the figure shows, the DOB dedicated themselves to educating ‘the variant’ (lesbians) and the general public about homosexuality with the hope that their work would lead to self-acceptance for individual lesbians and social acceptance in American society. As both D’Emilio and Gallo note, the DOB

⁶⁰ Monahan, p.38.

⁶¹ Gallo, p.2.

⁶² Ibid., p.6.

⁶³ Lyon and Martin were the longest standing members of the DOB, and each spent time as editor of *The Ladder*; Lyon was editor from 1956 – 1961, and Martin was editor from 1961 -1963.

⁶⁴ Volume 1-14 of *The Ladder* was printed in connection to The Daughters of Bilitis,

purpose of the *Daughters of* **BILITIS**

A WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF PROMOTING
 THE INTEGRATION OF THE HOMOSEXUAL INTO SOCIETY BY:

- ① Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic and economic implications—this to be accomplished by establishing and maintaining as complete a library as possible of both fiction and non-fiction literature on the sex deviant theme; by sponsoring public discussions on pertinent subjects to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other professions; by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society.
- ② Education of the public at large through acceptance first of the individual, leading to an eventual breakdown of erroneous taboos and prejudices; through public discussion meetings aforementioned; through dissemination of educational literature on the homosexual theme.
- ③ Participation in research projects by duly authorized and responsible psychologists, sociologists and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of the homosexual.
- ④ Investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual, proposal of changes to provide an equitable handling of cases involving this minority group, and promotion of these changes through due process of law in the state legislatures.

Figure 1.1: Daughters of Bilitis Statement of Purpose. Inside front cover of *The Ladder* Vol. 02 No. 02 November 1957. Image Source: Microfilm University of California, Berkeley

was the first lesbian civil rights group, joining the Mattachine Society and One, Inc., in the homophile movement, a precursor to gay civil rights groups. The DOB, at least initially, joined other homophile organisations in an 'integrationist' strategy to garner social acceptance. Throughout the late 50s and 60s, the Daughters 'championed outward conformity to achieve integration,' a practice that led to an arguably inadvertent segregation between middle-class lesbians and the working-class lesbians whose lifestyle they found so objectionable.⁶⁵ This division between middle-class and working-class lesbians inadvertently also highlights racial schisms within the wider lesbian population the United States.

According to Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, racially divided lesbian communities were normalised before the Civil Rights Movement. While racial integration in lesbian bar culture began to happen in the 1950s, for the most part black lesbians avoided lesbians bars in favour of house parties.⁶⁶ Moreover, when desegregation along racial lines began within the lesbian bar culture of Buffalo New York, 'the primarily white, upwardly mobile crowd was distinctly uncomfortable associating with the tougher, more obvious crowd.'⁶⁷ It is from this *discomfort* that the Daughters of Bilitis formed in the late 1950s. This is not to say that the formation of the DOB was racially motivated; however, as middle-class lesbians were 'primarily white' in the 1950 and 1960s, the demographics of the DOB would inevitably skew towards a white, middle-class majority. Despite this, it must further be noted

⁶⁵ Gallo, p.24; I revisit this topic in greater detail in Chapter Four.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, *Boots of Leather Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, (New York: Penguin, 1993). Kennedy and Davis provide an example given by Audre Lorde: 'Although the bars offered the company of other lesbians which she needed and desired, ultimately she always felt alone in these settings because there were so few Black women, and the structures of racism prevented them from connecting with one another,' p.115; p.43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.115.

that lesbians of colour did participate in the formation of the DOB. According to Gallo, the original eight founding members of the DOB were a diverse group in terms of race, ethnicity, and class.⁶⁸ 'DOB groups included women from varying backgrounds: working class and professional, young, middle-aged, older; a mix of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.'⁶⁹ Additionally, women of colour held official positions in the DOB, including Cleo Bonner, who in 1963 became DOB National President. While there are notable inclusions of lesbians of colour within the DOB's history, the issues facing lesbians of colour were not evidently included in community discussion. As Gallo notes, while Bonner's DOB presidency was evidence of interracial activism, she had a 'low profile' in the DOB.⁷⁰ The effect of racial tokenism can be seen within the pages of *The Ladder*. In terms of visual representation of women of colour in *The Ladder*, the cover images and cartoons feature identifiably white figures a majority of the time. Few exceptions do exist, such as the cover photo of Indonesian reader Ger van B and the DOB New York vice-president, Ernestine Eckstein,⁷¹ which is accompanied by an eight-page interview highlighting the lack of people of colour within the homophile movement.⁷² In the interview, Eckstein is questioned about the 'Negro movement' and her experiences with discrimination within the homophile movement: 'I feel the homophile is more open to Negroes than, say, a lot of churches, for example. Unfortunately I

⁶⁸ 'There were already racial ethnic, and class differences among the eight of them: Rose was Filipina, Mary was Chicana, and both women involved in relationships with white women. Two founders had children, two worked in typically "blue-collar" trades, and two held "white-collar" administrative positions.' Kennedy and Davis, p.6.

⁶⁹ Gallo, p.59.

⁷⁰ 'There is very little by or about her in *The Ladder*' – Ibid, p.91.

⁷¹ *The Ladder*, ed. Barbara Gittings, 9.2, (November 1964), Cover; *The Ladder*, ed. Barbara Gittings, 10.9, (June 1966), Cover.

⁷² Kay Tobin, 'Interview with Ernestine,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Barbara Gittings, 10.9, (June 1966), 4-11.

find that there are very few Negroes in the homophile movement. I keep looking for them, they're not there. And I think there should be more, I really do.'⁷³ When evaluating and investigating the textual community of *The Ladder* to formulate a lens for reading lesbian pulp fiction, I must take this information into consideration. As lesbians of colour rarely appear within the history of the DOB and within the pages of *The Ladder*, it is difficult to truly ascertain the identity of certain authors and contributors to the magazine, for it is difficult to say whether or not an anonymous reader is or is not a person of colour. What *can* be said of *The Ladder*, however, is that due to the predominantly white, middle-class membership of the DOB, it can be inferred that the voices of the contributors were also predominantly those of white women.

The first issue of *The Ladder* was published in October 1956, featuring 12 pages of mimeographed material, and featured a cover by 'BOB,' the art director for *The Ladder* (see Figure 1.2), which gave *The Ladder* a home-made look; this image would be featured as the cover of *The Ladder* for the first year, deviating only slightly by the colour of the ink and the paper it was printed on.⁷⁴ While it was not the first lesbian periodical *The Ladder* maintained an impressive run of sixteen years, fourteen of which were in connection with the DOB.⁷⁵ Initially their circulation was small, confined to members of the DOB, their friends and family. According to Manuela Soares, on paper, *The Ladder's* circulation 'eventually

⁷³ Ibid., p.6.

⁷⁴ 'BOB', was the nick-name for a woman named Brian O'Brian,

⁷⁵ *The Ladder* was preceded by *Vice Versa* (1947-1948), 'America's Gayest Magazine,' and published for a short time by 'Lisa Ben.' Like *The Ladder*, *Vice Versa* contained many literary components, including reviews of plays, films, and the inclusion of original poetry.

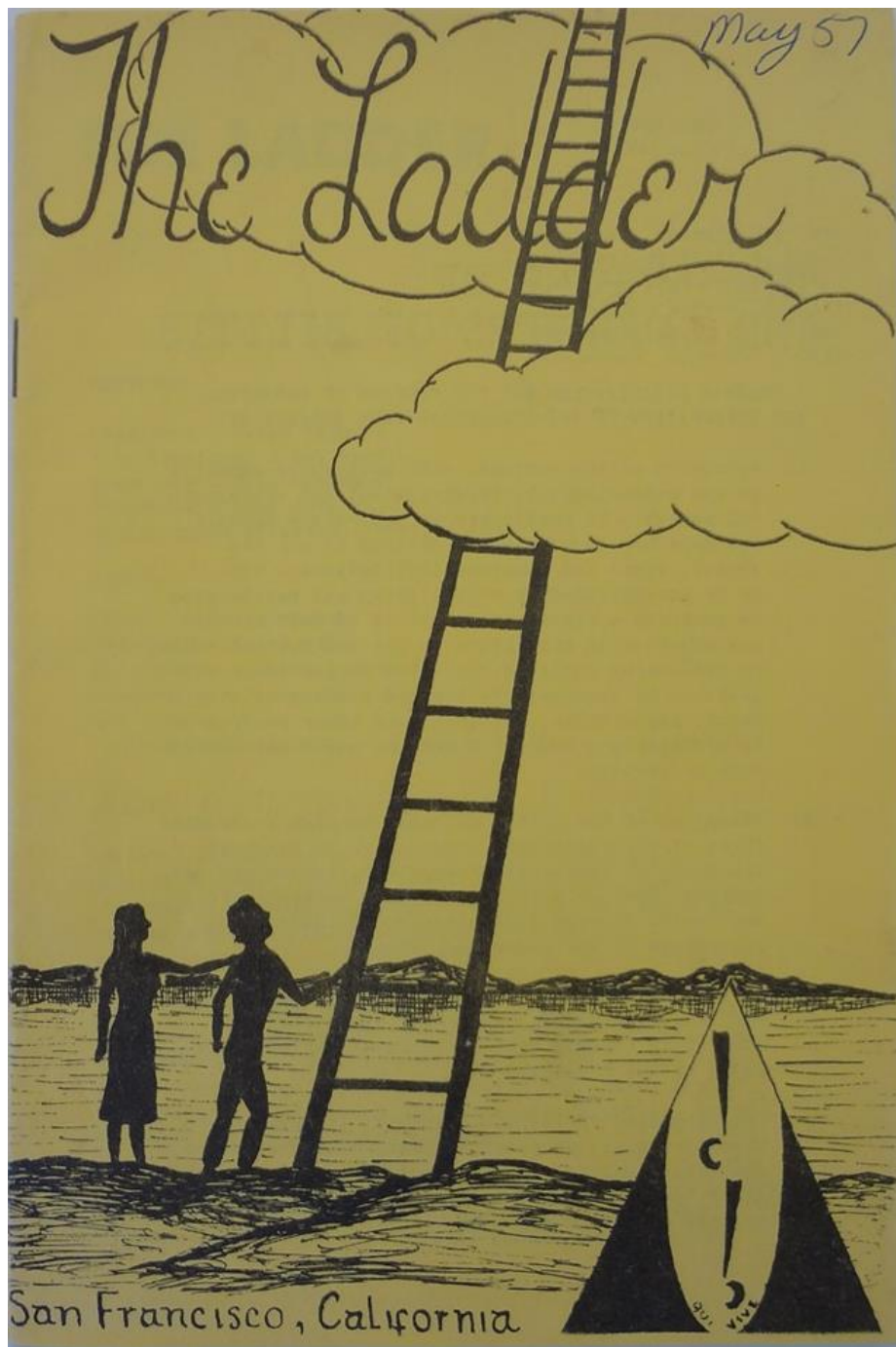


Figure 1.2: Front Cover of *The Ladder* Volume 01 Number 08, May 1957. Permissions: The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley. Call Number: HQ75 L33 V. 1:8

reached several thousand by the time it ceased publication.⁷⁶ Moreover, at the height of its publication, *The Ladder* was sold in select book stores and through magazine distributors in major cities across the country. The subscription figures cannot account for the number of readers who accessed used copies of *The Ladder*. According to Gittings, copies of *The Ladder* 'somehow got passed around from hand-to-hand and they got mailed from one subscriber to another in some other part of the country, who would then send it to someone else.'⁷⁷ Additionally, in an interview with the DOB Video Project for the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Judith Schwarz describes how thirty to fifty of her co-workers would share the same copy by passing it round via a bag hidden in the darkroom at her place of work.⁷⁸ While Schwarz's example may be an anomaly, both her interview and Gittings' interview illustrate how multiple readers would share *The Ladder* and how necessarily cautious lesbians had to be. Moreover, it demonstrates the way in which lesbian literature was physically passed from reader to reader. However, it is the communal sharing of *The Ladder* that may have contributed to the demise of the magazine. Because *The Ladder* was produced with volunteered labour and content, the magazine was dependent on the subscription funds, which were reduced by readers sharing individual copies

⁷⁶ Manuela Soares, 'The Purloined *Ladder*: Its place in Lesbian History,' in *Gay and Lesbian Literature Since World War II* ed. Sonya L Jones. (New York: The Harrington Park Press 1998), 27-49, p.29.

⁷⁷ *Before Stonewall*

⁷⁸ Manuela Soares provides a quotation for Schwarz's interview, p.29. In addition to Soares' transcription in her essay, I additionally accessed the Daughters of Bilitis Video Project which in which Soares conducted interviews with Barbara Gittings, Barbara Grier, and Phillis Lyon and Del Martin. These are available through the Lesbian Herstory Archives online database.

For a significant portion of *The Ladder's* run, the DOB received anonymous donations from a wealthy woman, nicknamed 'Pennsylvania.'⁷⁹ According to Gallo, from 1963 to 1968, '[she] contributed approximately \$100,000 to the DOB in checks of \$3,000, written to a different Daughter each time.'⁸⁰ When Willer stepped down as president and left the DOB in 1968, the funds her friend provided also disappeared.⁸¹ Moreover, in the same general assembly that inspired Willer to leave the DOB, they voted to separate *The Ladder's* finances from that of the DOB. The following announcement appeared in the December 1968/January 1969 issue:

As voted by the General Assembly in August, 1968 The Ladder is now a separate department within DOB, Inc., with separate books and separate bank accounts: in particular, a Ladder Savings Account for all donations earmarked for the magazine. DOB contracts with all donors who specify that their donations are for The Ladder, that these monies will be held in trust for The Ladder if not immediately used therefor. Such checks may be made payable to The Ladder. Not only The Ladder Staff, but all of us in DOB will be *most* grateful for Ladder donations of every size from \$1 to \$1,000 to...⁸²

⁷⁹ Pennsylvania was acquainted with the DOB through Shirley Willer, president of the New York Chapter of the DOB (1963-1966), and National President (1966-1968)

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.83. Gallo also notes, that the donor was 'The daughter of a prominent East Coast family, who also supported organizations like Planned Parenthood' and that she 'never allowed her name to be recorded nor her contributions to DOB acknowledged.'

⁸¹ From the Lesbian Herstory Archives: 'Problems in the Daughters of Bilitis led to Willer's proposal to eliminate the board and the national office, replacing both with a representative body of chapter leader. Each chapter would be autonomous, controlled and financed locally. Each chapter would also decide whether and how to support The Ladder, which would be the only remaining national project of the new federation. This planned vote was deferred from 1968 to 1970. In response to this, Willer quit the movement entirely in 1968.' (<http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka/collections/show/43>).

⁸² 'A Ladder Fund,' *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon 13. 3-4, (December 1968/January 1969), 32.

Evidence such as the printed passage below marks the steady decline of *The Ladder*, perhaps also indicating that members of the DOB began to lack confidence in the future of the magazine. As the funds from 'Pennsylvania' ceased, *The Ladder's* staff had to increasingly ask for donations from readers. A prime example of the desperation felt by the staff appears in a plea from Editor Gene Damon (Barbara Grier). On the final page of the August/September 1969 issue, Damon repeats her plea for material from readers, ending her full-page appeal by asking for donations:

A special note to those of you who make up the hard core lazy, those with real talent and ability to do something for this magazine, your voice in the world, but whose personal concerns, job responsibilities, whatever, keep making you put off the day when you will come forward. Don't wait until there is no LADDER to help.

If you have no other gift, how about sending us a little money, now and then, to help defray the enormous expense of brining this magazine to you. Every \$1 helps us.

How many friends do you have who would, in theory, be interested in this magazine who have never seen a copy? Christmas is coming, a gift subscription gives us one more paid subscriber, one more person to help in this work. Where are you? What are you doing? What can you do?

WHY NOT! HELP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!⁸³

In Grier's plea, the emotional connection she and others felt with *The Ladder* is clear through the language used in the note. By highlighting the threat that the publication might fold without financial aid, Grier overtly challenges 'lazy' readers to participate either through contributing material for publication or through financial means. Through the desperate tone of Grier's plea, it is evident that Grier and others felt that *The Ladder's* existence was in

⁸³ Gene Damon, 'You Can Help,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 13. 11-12 (Aug/Sept, 1969), 49.

jeopardy. The staff had already made the decision to cut the number of publications each year in half after struggling to meet their monthly publication deadlines. This decision would have been an attempt to cut the cost of publication down, but it would also allow the volunteer staff more time to collect and compile material for the magazine. It is perhaps this personal connection and fear that drove Grier to take *The Ladder* out of DOB hands.

The action taken by Grier and DOB National President Rita LaPorte created controversy over the fate of *The Ladder* and of the DOB. In 1970, Rita LaPorte, certain that she would not be re-elected at the next DOB convention (1970) took the only two copies of *The Ladder's* mailing list from the San Francisco office and addressograph company.⁸⁴ According to Barabara Gittings,⁸⁵ Grier and LaPorte's theft of mailing list became the main subject of the 1970 DOB conference in New York City: 'They weren't able to do very much about thinking or expanding or continuing the organization because in effect, the props have been knocked out from under them with the theft of *The Ladder* and I think that it was just the last touch and DOB as a national organization really never recovered and was not a national organization after that.'⁸⁶ In Gallo's words, 'In taking over the fourteen-year-old lesbian publication in the world, they took away one of DOB's few organizational assets [...] its most effective means of communication and survival.'⁸⁷ According to Grier, however, the actions she and Rita LaPorte took were done as an effort to save *The Ladder*. In a 1987

⁸⁴ Soares, pp.42-43.

⁸⁵ Manuela Soares, "Barbara Gittings and Kay Tobin, Tape 1 of 3 – 3 of 3, February 20, 1988," *Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA*, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/246>.

⁸⁶ Manuela Soares, "LHA Daughters of Bilitis Video Project: Barbara Grier, Tape 2 of 4, November 27, 1987," *Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA*, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/235>.

⁸⁷ Gallo, p.167.

interview, Grier acknowledged that taking *The Ladder* away from the DOB played a major role in the demise of the DOB as a national organisation. However, she asserts that ‘none of these things were done with malice aforethought or with intention to damage.’⁸⁸ The reason for taking *The Ladder*, Grier explains, was to rescue it: ‘*The Ladder* was the last thing to be considered in everything and in my head I probably realized if there were no *Ladder* [...] you don’t have an organization. But I did not take *The Ladder* away to prove that their organization would fall apart at their feet [...] My intention was to wrest *The Ladder* away from people who were not paying attention to it.’⁸⁹

Nevertheless, Grier’s move to save *The Ladder* would be short-lived; the oldest lesbian periodical in the world would only survive two more years after separating from the DOB. Many factors contributed to the decline of the magazine. As Gallo notes, even with a mailing list of 3,845 names, there were no funds to maintain circulation of *The Ladder*. Grier even admits to being responsible for the demise of the ladder, noting that she hadn’t thought about how the magazine would survive without the DOB or Pennsylvania to provide financial backing; the subscription revenue was not enough, and the reality of advertising funds was never realised because only sex services and porn distributors were interested in advertising in the magazine.⁹⁰ Along with low subscription revenue and donations from readers, the proliferation of women’s liberation and lesbian magazines in the early 1970s was the final blow to the magazine. As advertising in *The Ladder* shows (see Figure 1.3), new magazines and newspapers on women’s rights and lesbianism started to be produced across the country; periodicals including *Off Our Backs*, *Arena Three*, and *Mother* – amongst many others –

⁸⁸ Manuela Soares, “LHA Daughters of Bilitis Video Project: Barbara Grier, Tape 2 of 4, November 27, 1987,”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Gallo, pp.180-181.

created too much competition for *The Ladder*.⁹¹ The magazine ended with the August/September issue in 1972.

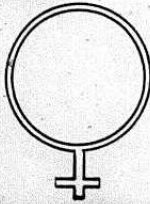
As Gallo, Soares, and John D’Emilio have noted in their respective writings, *The Ladder* was a welcome and vital means of communication among members of the DOB and a wider lesbian readership. Moreover, it functioned as an open forum, using the material sent in voluntarily by DOB members and other *Ladder* subscribers. Through discussions of religion, psychology, law, politics, and literature, *The Ladder* provided its lesbian readers with a means of connecting to one another, even when face-to-face interaction was inhibited by geographical location. Moreover, as Soares points out, reading *The Ladder* today provides us with ‘a history of the lesbian rights movement in the United States as it existed in the latter half of the twentieth century.’⁹² The place of *The Ladder* in lesbian history and in the history of the DOB has primarily focused on its role as a tool of political and social communication. While this has been important to understanding the cultural significance of *The Ladder*, it is also important to note the role *The Ladder*, as a lesbian magazine, played in the development of an LTC. Moreover, through closely researching *The Ladder*’s LTC, a lens can be constructed for reading lesbian pulp fiction novels published in the 1950s and early 1960s. This lens takes into consideration the demographics of this specific LTC and its reading practices, including how community members evaluated the lesbian-themed reading materials, or ‘lesbiana’, available to them at the time. From

⁹¹ These magazines additionally advertised themselves in the final volumes of *The Ladder*: periodicals like *Arena Three*, *Off Our Backs*, and *Mother* were advertised along-side Monique Wittig’s *Les Guerilleres* and lesbian-themed jewellery.

⁹² Soares, p.29.

**WOMEN... WOMEN
READ**

Arena three



**A SPECIAL MONTHLY
PUBLICATION FOR WOMEN.**

**25p (U.S. subscribers send \$9.60
for one year. sea mail delivery)**

address:

bcm seahorse London WC1 England



**CBS-TV'S MIKE
WALLACE RANKS
THE GREAT
SPECKLED BIRD
AMONG THE
NATION'S BEST
UNDERGROUND
NEWSPAPERS.**

SUBSCRIBE ANYWAY!

Make your check payable to the Atlanta Cooperative News Project in the amount of \$6/year, or \$3.50/year if you are a student or GI. Post Office Box 54495, Atlanta Ga. 30308. If you are a student or GI, please note the name of your school or base.

Name _____

Address _____

Zip: _____

The BIRD
The Great Speckled

OFF OUR BACKS

**BOX 4859
CLEVELAND PARK STATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20008**

\$6.00 Per Year

WHAT IS MOTHER ?

MOTHER is the up-to-date monthly newspaper for gay women across the US.

**News, interviews, events, letters, photos,
commentary — all in MOTHER**

To get a sample copy
mailed to you in a plain
envelope, just send 25¢
to:

MOTHER ←

**P.O. BOX 8507
STANFORD, CA. 94305**

Figure 1.3: Back cover advertisement of *The Ladder* Vol. 15 No. 01/02 October-November 1971
Image Source: Microfilm University of California, Berkeley

examining the history of the DOB and *The Ladder* it is possible to discern that the majority of the magazine's readership identified as lesbians (albeit privately), and were predominantly white and belonged to the middle-class. Moreover, a fair few of them were writers, or had a literary background. With these demographics in mind, the lens of *The Ladder's* LTC allows for an evaluation of lesbian pulp novels that takes into consideration the literary tastes of lesbians who read these novels around the time of their publication. This lens provides us with a lens that enables us to read certain lesbian pulp beyond the sexualised imagery of their covers and their status as low-brow media. It allows for interpretation of the texts through close reading. In the following section, I detail the dissemination of lesbian-themed material through the pages of *The Ladder* in order to establish the significance of literary discussion in the magazine.

3. The Dissemination of 'Lesbiana' and the Daughters of Bilitis Book Service

In Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952), the protagonist, Susan Mitchell, struggles to find detailed definitions of the term 'lesbian' in the texts available to her in her university library.⁹³ Packer's portrayal of Susan's attempt to learn about lesbianism is historically accurate. Locating books on lesbians in the 1950s was no easy task. As mentioned in the previous section, the impact of McCarthyism and Executive Order 10450 made the reading and acquisition of lesbian-themed titles very difficult. Moreover, what texts lesbian readers were able to find were often cherished, re-read, and passed on to trusted friends. For example, in

⁹³ Vin Packer, *Spring Fire*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004), pp.81-83.

Valerie Taylor's *Return to Lesbos* (1963), Erika Foreman is reluctant to sell her lesbian-themed texts 'to just anybody' when Frances Ollenfield finds them in a suburban Illinois second-hand bookstore.⁹⁴ Taylor's description of the books 'huddled together in an unfriendly world'⁹⁵ and Packer's description of the lack of information on lesbians in the 1950s accurately describe the social climate experienced by lesbian readers in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, it is clear to see how the inclusion of Gene Damon's 'Lesbiana' column in *The Ladder* was a valuable addition to a much-needed magazine for lesbian readers.

While 'Lesbiana' did not appear in *The Ladder* until the sixth issue, in May 1957, it is clear from the first issue of the magazine that the editorial staff intended to incorporate literary material. In the first issue, under the heading 'Lesbiana Literature' (see Figure 1.4), the magazine announced that seventy books had been donated to the DOB by a 'young woman from Philadelphia' and that they planned to publish a bibliography of fiction on the lesbian theme. Separate from this paragraph, the editors ask if any readers have used books they would be willing to donate to the DOB library. The request for donations of used books reflected the way in which lesbian texts, including *The Ladder* itself and lesbian paperbacks, were passed from reader to reader, either because the books were hard to obtain, or because lesbian readers desired discretion in obtaining reading material. Several lines down, the editors promise 'a regular department for book reviews' in future issues. In the December 1956 issue, they follow through on their promise with a review of *Homosexuals Today* (1956), described as 'a hand book of Organizations and Publications' from One, Inc.

⁹⁴ Valerie Taylor, *Return to Lesbos*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), pp.26-27.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p.26.

LESBIANA LITERATURE

With the aid of a young woman from Philadelphia who has some 70 odd titles in her personal collection of fiction on the Lesbian theme, the Daughters of Bilitis are compiling a bibliography to be published in future issues of *The Ladder*.

Do you have any books in your collection that serve only the purpose of gathering dust? We want old books - any old books. Those on the homosexual theme will be added to the library now maintained in San Francisco. The others will be turned over to book dealers for credit on titles needed to round out the library collection. Because of lack of funds, the library is almost entirely dependent on your donations . . .

We need manuscripts (both fiction and non-fiction) by and about women to correct erroneous conceptions - to depict Lesbianism as it is, not as is supposed.

In future issues a regular department for book reviews will be published in *The Ladder*.

Another subject we would like more information on concerns women whose families are aware of their deviate tendencies. So many of us question the advisability of telling the family. Can you help or advise?

Reader comment will be appreciated. Write
P.O. Box 2183, San Francisco, California.

Figure 1.4: 'Lesbiana Literature of *The Ladder* Vol. 01 No. 01 October 1956, p. 10 Image Source: Microfilm University of California, Berkeley.

On examining the first issues of *The Ladder*, we begin to see the path, which lead to the publication of 'Lesbiana' in the March 1957 issue.

Throughout its appearance in *The Ladder*, the 'Lesbiana' column was written by 'Gene Damon', one of Barbara Grier's many pen names used for her contributions to the magazine.⁹⁶ For the majority of its run, 'Lesbiana' took a list-like form. The titles of the texts were numbered, and the full publication information was given, which would enable the reader to find the book. What followed was a brief description of the text, often indicating the quality of the writing and the manner in which lesbians were portrayed. Throughout the publication of 'Lesbiana', Grier included titles from multiple genres, including poetry, short stories, fiction, and non-fiction publications. According to Grier, 'An item is included either because the literary quality warrants it, OR because the treatment is sympathetic, unusual, or— simply— entertaining. Each review attempts to indicate the special merit of the book or story.'⁹⁷ Thus, male and female authors of the listed 'lesbiana' texts included Honoré De Balzac, D.H. Lawrence, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, as well as lesser known authors. Moreover, novels we would consider classics today were listed amongst paperback fiction, scientific studies in medicine and psychology, and academic bibliographies such as *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1958), which owed much of its sales and success to its review and advertisement in *The Ladder*.

⁹⁶ Barbara Grier wrote under some of the following pseudonyms: Gene Damon, Vern Niven, Lennox Strong, Marilyn Barrow, Dorothy Lyle, and Irene Fisk; but Grier never published material in *The Ladder* under her own name. 'According to Grier, the reason she used several pen names was that she contributed so much material to the pages of *The Ladder* she felt she *had* to use other names.' Soares, p.33.

⁹⁷ Gene Damon, "Lesbiana," in *The Ladder*, ed. Barbara Gittings, 8.2 (November 1963), 8-10, p.8.

In the first 'Lesbiana' column, Grier listed four titles: *The Collected Works of Pierre Louys*, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radcliffe Hall, *Wind Woman* by Carol Hales, and *Claudine at School* by Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette. The selection of these first titles was not without significance. As I previously mentioned, the DOB derived their name from Pierre Louys' fictional Sapphic character, Bilitis. Placing Louys' works at the top of the Lesbiana list establishes the literary genealogy of the DOB and *The Ladder*. According to Gretchen Shultz, though the DOB knew that Bilitis was fabricated, they were able to refashion Bilitis from a voyeuristic figure into a literary site for their lesbian heritage.⁹⁸ Schultz also notes that Louys gave Bilitis her own narrative voice, and claimed that his poems were 'among the first to celebrate lesbianism instead of vilify it.' As we can see from the review of Louys' works, Gittings tells readers that *Songs of Bilitis* depicts 'a searching and sensitive story of Lesbian [sic] love.'⁹⁹ Thus, from the very first title, we can see how the 'Lesbiana' column participated in providing and searching for sources of positive lesbian identification for *The Ladder's* lesbian readership.

The second title listed, *The Well of Loneliness*, continues to establish a literary genealogy for lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s. Hall's novel has long been considered a classic piece of lesbian literature, as evinced by Grier's review of the book. She writes,

The most well known of all Lesbian novels certainly needs little comment. The fact that every book on the subject since is rated on its jacket as "the best since" or "comparable to" in order to increase sales is indicative enough of the general reception and appeal of "The Well."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Gretchen Schultz, 'Daughters of Bilitis: Literary Genealogy and Lesbian Authenticity.' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7.3, (2001), 377-389.

⁹⁹ Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana', *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 1 .6 (March 1957), 12.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

In fact, many lesbian authors, including lesbian pulp fiction writer Ann Bannon, have noted reading *The Well* prior to beginning their careers as writers. Despite Hall's adherences to Havelock Ellis' theories on *inversion* in homosexuals in the characterisation of Stephen Gordon, Hall's book evidently became a cherished piece of lesbiana. Thus, by including Hall's title in its list of lesbian literature, *The Ladder* further establishes the editor's goals to provide readers with quality reviews. By including an established literary classic, Grier's list of lesbiana not only sought to provide entertainment for her readers, but sought to legitimise the magazine through literary reviews. In Gallo's words, *The Ladder* 'was intended as a vehicle for the individual lesbian to elevate herself, out of the depths of self-hatred and social strictures.' Thus, the act of reviewing texts included in what George E. Haggerty calls the 'heterodetermined canon'¹⁰¹ would have appealed to the integrationist strategy adopted in the early years of the DOB.

Additionally, in compiling a list of titles and reviews, Grier — along with other lesbian bibliographers — participated in the formation of a lesbian canon. Here, the term 'canon' is used in a cultural sense, as opposed to an academic one. The lesbian canon in this context refers to influential texts often read by lesbians in the United States. The 'Lesbiana' list reviewed 'masterpieces' such as *Claudine at School*, *The Well*, and Louy's poetry along with newer books such as *Wind Woman* by Carol Hale. While the 'Lesbiana' list did not provide a review for Hale's book, it was reviewed by Del Martin and Vera H. Plunkett in two articles printed earlier in the same volume. According to Martin, 'Miss Hales has a simple and easy

¹⁰¹ According to Haggerty, the *heterodetermined canon* excludes 'gay writers in a way parallel to the ways that black, Chicano, or other minority or women's writing has been excluded from the from the traditional Western canon' George E Haggerty, "The Gay Canon," *American Literary History*, 12.1-2 (Spring-Summer 2000), 284-297, p.285.

style of writing. She has done a good job of characterization. The layman will find a [true] picture of Lesbianism, while the Lesbian herself can find “greater insight” into her own make-up.’¹⁰² Martin provides the reader with a positive review of Hale’s book, while ‘Plunkett’ provides a more conflicted view. In addition to noting some ‘loose ends’ in the narrative, Plunkett sums up the review by adding, ‘Perhaps to the homosexual the complete acceptance of herself by the heroine after therapy will be acceptable, but I doubt if it will be to the heterosexual.’¹⁰³ As Martin and Plunkett’s reviews show, *Wind Woman* is discussed in terms of the benefit the text may hold for the lesbian reader and for the heterosexual reader. For lesbian readers, the book’s benefit supposedly lies in its ability to aid in any attempts to understand their identity. As for the heterosexual reader, Martin and Plunkett are divided. Martin’s assessment of the book argues that a heterosexual audience would benefit from the exposure to an accurate portrayal of lesbianism, when they may have previously been exposed to texts that created and perpetuated damaging stereotypes. Plunkett’s review, on the other hand, assumes that a heterosexual readership would dismiss the book’s portrayal of lesbianism, perhaps because it differs so greatly from the medical and psychological texts previously published in the 1950s. What both reviews have in common, however, are their focus on the representational politics of the book. Thus, both reviews indicate that the LTC of *The Ladder* was preoccupied with the portrayal of lesbians in fiction and non-fiction texts. In other words, staff, readers and contributors of *The Ladder* felt it was necessary to assess the messages (both explicit and inherent) in lesbian-themed texts, not only for the sake of lesbian

¹⁰² Del Martin and Vera Plunkett, ‘Two for the Price of One...Book Reviews, That Is’, *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 1.6 (March 1957), 10-11, p.10

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.11.

readers, but to assess the potentially damaging and unrealistic image of lesbians perpetuated in popular media.

Interestingly, of the few advertisements appearing in *The Ladder*, the editorial staff advertised the sale of the newly published book for ten consecutive issues, ending in December 1957. Eventually, once the DOB decided to provide a book service for their readers, *Wind Woman* would be included on their list of available titles. Moreover, the connection between 'Lesbiana' and longer book reviews would continue while the list form of the column was used. While not every issue of *The Ladder* would contain a longer book review, if one appeared, the titles of the reviewed text would be included on the 'Lesbiana' list. The combination of 'Lesbiana', longer book reviews, and the advertisement and sale of lesbian-themed books verifies the general interest of *The Ladder's* use of lesbian literature to promote positive images of lesbians primarily to their lesbian readership, but also to the wider mainstream American society. Through brief reviews about lesbian-focused texts, Gene Damon and *The Ladder* provided their readers with knowledge about existing novels. As mentioned in the previous section, Gene Damon's 'Lesbiana' column provided readers of *The Ladder* with brief reviews of numerous titles from varying genres. While the 'Lesbiana' column played an integral role in the formation of *The Ladder's* LTC, it was not the sole component. When considering this textual community, the 'Lesbiana' column only formed a portion of the textual interactions made between readers, authors, and publishers. Through 'Reader's Respond' letters, we can see the demand, not only for the *titles* of lesbian-themed reading material, but for a source from which to obtain physical copies of the listed literary material.

In the November 1958 'Readers Respond' column, two published letters highlight the difficulty book consumers had with obtaining lesbian-themed reading material. 'EW' of New Castle, Indiana, writes in her letter: 'I cannot secure any of them in the public library of this city, nor can I even get them from the state library and Indianapolis. I would like either buy some or borrow some of them to read.'¹⁰⁴ Following EW's letter, 'JWD' from Mauston, Wisconsin, voices her *great interest* in purchasing the materials reviewed in 'Lesbiana': 'Will you please let me know where I can procure these books, the publisher and price of the same, or if I may order them through your office.'¹⁰⁵ In response, the editor writes that they did 'not have as yet a book service available' and informs book dealers that the published letters were 'two of many' (see Figure 1.5).¹⁰⁶ The exchanges published in this issue establish that the consumer base of *The Ladder* needed help obtaining lesbian books, especially if the readers were from rural or suburban areas. Over a year later, and 'after much soul searching' and demand from readers, the Daughters of Bilitis started the DOB Book Service. Through the service, the DOB advertised predominantly fiction and non-fiction reading materials. This section examines the literary focus of the advertisements in *The Ladder* and its role in creating an LTC. It is often the case that the advertisement present in magazines allows for inferences to be made about the intended audience. This statement is especially true of commercially successful magazines. However, inferring the intended audience for non-profit magazines sustained by donations and a volunteer staff poses different challenges. When investigating *The Ladder*, the target audience is already known, for the magazine is written for and by lesbian women and their allies. What then can be inferred by the limited presence of

¹⁰⁴ 'Readers Respond' in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 3.2, (November 1958), 22-25, p.22

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid ; The editor at this time was Phyllis Lyon.

advertisements on the magazine's pages? While the focus of this section is on the advertisement of books sold through the DOB Book Service, it is important to first contextualise the role advertising played in the magazine. In other words, it is necessary to address the following questions: What was the price of advertising in *The Ladder*? What products or services were advertised? What are the identifiable trends in *The Ladder's* advertising policy? And what might be inferred about the target demographic through examining the advertisements? The cost of advertising in *The Ladder* over time is difficult to establish, for advertising rates were not printed in the magazine until July 1968 (see Figure 1.6).¹⁰⁷ As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the appearance of advertising costs is undoubtedly in reaction to the lost patronage of the anonymous donor, 'Pennsylvania.' Without the steady flow of income from her generous donations, *The Ladder* was pressured into attracting advertisers to support the magazine. In a letter addressed to potential advertisers, editor Helen Sanders provided information about *The Ladder's* demographic: '[Mostly] women 21-45 years old who have devoted a major portion of their leisure time to assisting the lesbian to become a more productive, secure citizen.' Without the availability of supporting information it is not possible to know the motivations of the editorial staff in avoiding directly identifying the readers as lesbians. Nevertheless, it is possible to make reasonable inferences taking into consideration the political and social climate in the US in the 1960s.

¹⁰⁷ The cost of advertising in *The Ladder* would make a consistent appearance in the magazine from Volume 13 Number 01/02, October-November 1968. These rates would also remain unchanged.

READERS RESPOND

"I THOROUGHLY ENJOY READING EACH ISSUE OF THE LADDER. I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHERE I MIGHT OBTAIN SOME OF THE BOOKS YOU LIST FROM TIME TO TIME UNDER THE FEATURE 'LESBIANA'. I CANNOT SECURE ANY OF THEM IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THIS CITY, NOR CAN I EVEN GET THEM FROM THE STATE LIBRARY AT INDIANAPOLIS. I WOULD LIKE TO EITHER BUY SOME OF THESE BOOKS OR BORROW SOME OF THEM TO READ."

E.W., NEW CASTLE, IND.

* * * * *

"I AM A RECENT SUBSCRIBER AND HAVE JUST RECEIVED THE FIRST ISSUE OF SEPTEMBER, 1958, AND AM VERY MUCH PLEASED WITH SAME, AND I KNOW YOU ARE DOING A WONDERFUL JOB FOR WHICH I COMMEND YOU MOST HIGHLY."

"I AM GREATLY INTERESTED IN THE BOOKS LISTED ON PAGE 15, LESBIANA. WILL YOU PLEASE LET ME KNOW WHERE I CAN PROCURE THESE BOOKS, THE PUBLISHER AND PRICE OF SAME, OR IF I MAY ORDER THEM THROUGH YOUR OFFICE."

"STAMPS ENCLOSED FOR YOUR REPLY, ALSO SMALL DONATION. I AM ISOLATED HERE, SO YOU CAN REALIZE HOW REFRESHING IT IS TO READ ABOUT THOSE THAT I HAVE THINGS IN COMMON WITH."

J.W.D., MAUSTON, WISC.

BOOK DEALERS - ATTENTION!!

THE LETTERS ABOVE ARE BUT TWO OF MANY. METHINKS IT WOULD BEHOOVE YOU TO ADVERTISE IN THE LADDER. RATES ON REQUEST. - ED.

TO YOU, E.W. AND J.W.D., WE DO NOT AS YET HAVE A BOOK SERVICE AVAILABLE THROUGH THE LADDER OR THE DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS. IF THE BOOK DEALERS IN YOUR CITY CANNOT FIND THE BOOKS YOU WANT MANY DEALERS IN LARGER CITIES SPECIALIZE IN FINDING OUT OF PRINT OR HARD TO GET BOOKS, OR EVEN THOSE ON CERTAIN SUBJECTS, SUCH AS LESBIANISM. -ED.

Figure 1.5: 'Readers Respond', The Ladder Volume 03 Number 02, November 1958, p.22.
Image Source: Microfilm University of California, Berkeley.

Moreover, lesbian invisibility in the 1960s mainstream creates a paradox when analysing the advertising practices of *The Ladder* through Sanders' advertisement. The purpose of *The Ladder* and the Daughters of Bilitis was to elevate the social status of lesbians in mainstream society. Through education and outreach, the DOB aimed to show the public that lesbians were no different from heterosexual women; and Sanders' decision to identify *The Ladder's* readership as *women* aligns with the over-all representational politics supported by the DOB.¹⁰⁸ In other words, because the DOB supported the ideology that lesbian women were 'women first,' Sander's decision to identify *The Ladder's* readers as *women* not only furthers the DOB's central ideology, but avoids the alienation of non-lesbian allies. Moreover, the political message inherent in Sander's letter appeals to businesses who may wish to demonstrate that they are sympathisers of 'the homosexual and homophile movement.' By claiming the *women* readers have 'leisure time,' Sanders additionally suggests that readers are members of the middle class and have at least *some* disposable income.

Nevertheless, Sanders' decision to refrain from identifying readers of *The Ladder* as lesbians also participates in what Castle has referred to as 'ghosting' lesbian existence. In other words, while the readers are identified as women who have 'devoted' their time to improving the social status of lesbians, in not directly naming the readers as 'lesbian,' the identities of the lesbian readers are obscured and closeted. It is, however, possible to infer the practical reasons behind Sander's decision to create a vague description of the magazine's lesbian readers. First, because the political and social climate of the 1960s remained hostile towards homosexuality, it would have been dangerous to directly 'out' the readers. Second,

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter Two.

Dear Advertiser,

May we draw your attention to the potentials of a new customer market? The LADDER has reversed its long established policy and is now accepting general advertising.

A thousand adult readers regularly receive The LADDER, a magazine circulated throughout this country featuring news and views of the homosexual and the homophile movement of particular interest to women.

Most of our readers are women 21-45 years old who have devoted a major portion of their leisure time to assisting the lesbian to become a more productive, secure citizen. Most of our readers believe that discrimination against the homosexual is unfair and unjustified. To these readers your advertisement places you on record as an ally in their personal area of deep concern. Our readers are apt to become and remain loyal customers. Charges for single insertions of advertisement copy are given below.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this letter.

Very truly yours,
The Editor

ADVERTISING RATES

Inside Cover	\$100
Full Page	\$ 80
Half Page	\$ 45
Quarter Page	\$ 25
<i>Repeated advertisements at reduced rates.</i>	

Please mail your advertising copy and check in full to:

DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS, INC.
1005 Market Street
Room 208
San Francisco, California 94103

Figure 1.6: Cost of advertising in *The Ladder* Vol. 12 No. 09 July 1968, p. 26
Image Source: Microfilm University of California, Berkeley

because it would have discouraged potential advertisers to associate their businesses with a lesbian periodical, Sander's letter can be interpreted as an attempt to encourage business to advertise in *The Ladder*, in spite of its lesbian theme. Despite Sander's letter, general advertisements would yield limited responses, a majority of which were for sex services and pornography.¹⁰⁹ As issues of *The Ladder* show, the staff refused to make themselves dependent on the advertisement revenue from the sex and pornography industries, for to do so would not only lower the social standing of the magazine, but it would go against the politics of the Women's Rights Movement. As a result, the advertisements that do appear in *The Ladder* mostly promoted the sale of literature connected with the Women's Liberation Movement, including: periodicals, literature, and song books (see Table 1.1).

Because *The Ladder* placed limitations on its advertising policies, the advertisements that did appear in the magazine change the commercial relationship between the advertisers, the magazine (*The Ladder*) and the consumers (the reader). It is ill-advised (if not impossible) to generalise this commercial relationship, for the role of advertising in *The Ladder* has not been consistent throughout the sixteen years of its publication. Therefore, when considering the role that literary advertising played in *The Ladder*, it is best to separate the life of the magazine into separate time frames. These time frames are named as follows:

1. Pre-Daughters of Bilitis Book Service: [Volume 1:01 – Volume 4.07]
2. DOB Book Service: [Volume 4.08-12.11/12]
3. The Gertrude Stein Memorial Book Service: [Volume 13 - 14]
4. Post DOB split [Volume 15 -16]

¹⁰⁹ Gallo, pp.180-181

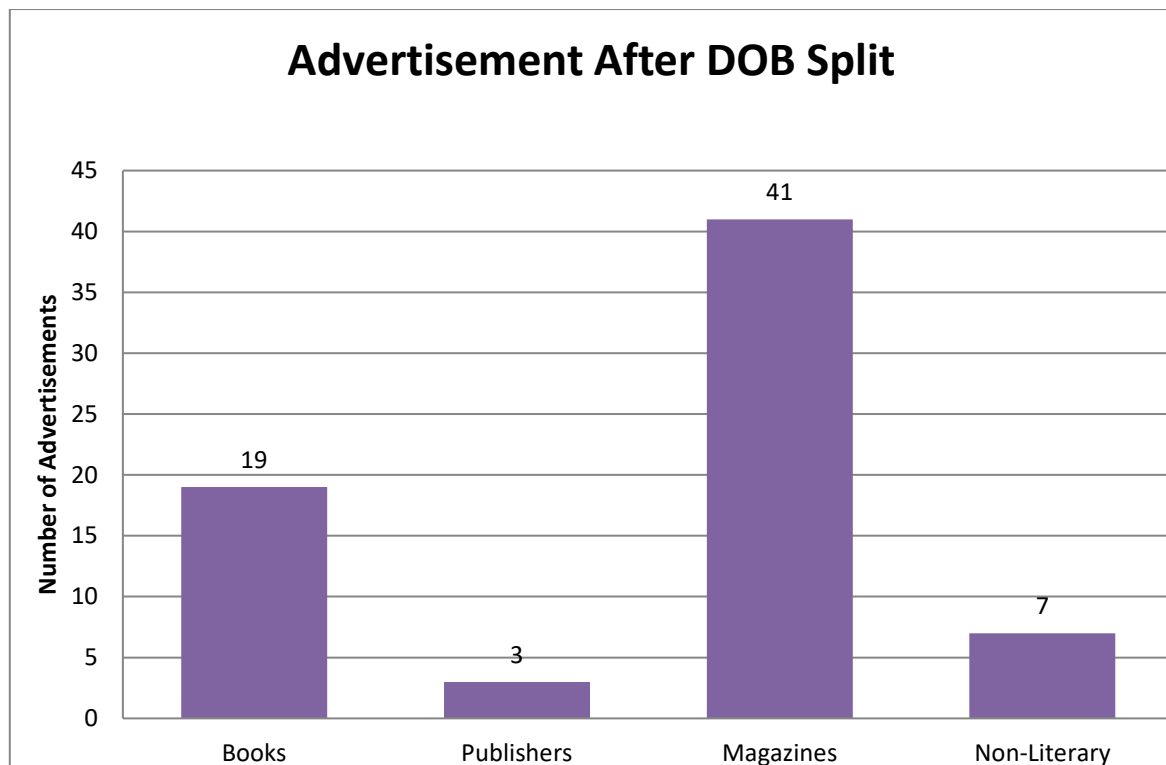


Table 1.1: Frequency of advertising in *The Ladder* October/November 1970 - August/September 1972

I focus predominantly on the second time period to draw conclusions about the literary component of *The Ladder* and to ascertain the shape of the LTC formed through the magazine's readership. The analysis of *The Ladder* as a textual community will focus on the advertisement of books and other written materials; and specifically on the advertisement of books before and during the time-span encompassing the DOB Book Service: the first two time-frames listed above. The latter two time periods may yield analysis of the literature disseminated through *The Ladder* during and after the halt of 'Philadelphia's' donations and subsequent separation of *The Ladder* the DOB; however, here I am more interested in examining the limited and carefully selected advertisement of books during the height of *The Ladder's* publication as an 'underground' and not-for-profit magazine.

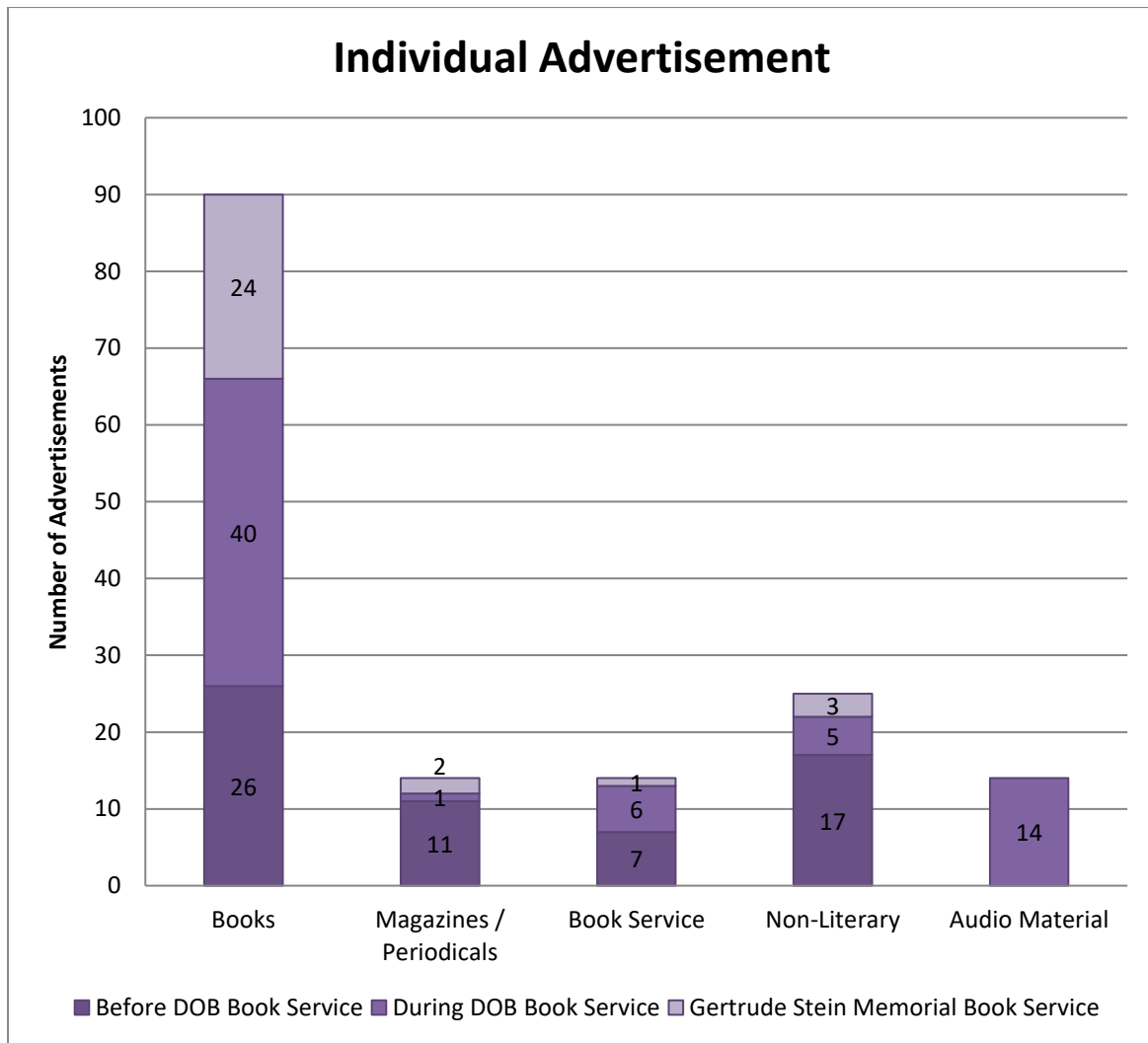


Table 1.2: Frequency of individual advertisements in *The Ladder* October 1956- August/September 1970

In the analysis of individual advertisements in *The Ladder* between October 1956 and August-September 1970,¹¹⁰ it is clear that a majority of the sparse advertising space was dedicated to the sale of literary materials (see Table 1.2).¹¹¹ Through each of the aforementioned time

¹¹⁰ This data incorporated in this analysis reviews the state of advertising in the time that *The Ladder* was still associated with the Daughters of Bilitis: Volume 1 – Volume 14.

¹¹¹ Table 1.2 displays the frequency of different types of advertising that appeared in *The Ladder* over time. The advertisements have been categorised as follows: books, magazines/periodicals, book services, Non-Literary, and Audio Material. The data from the advertisement of books do not include the titles that appear on the DOB Book Service lists; the data on the graph only represents the advertisement of individual books. The 'Book Service' included advertisements from book sellers from across the United States, including Chips

periods, solitary advertisements for non-literary products amounted to 16 percent of advertisements, while solitary advertisements for books alone amounted to 57 percent of advertisements.¹¹² Of the books advertised, the following titles were advertised the most: *Wind Woman* by Carol Hales (ten occurrences), *Gay Bar* by Helen P Branson (nine occurrences), and *The Lesbian in Literature: a Bibliography* by Gene Damon and Lee Stuart (thirty-five occurrences). There is an identifiable preference toward print materials and services that provide printed materials. In each of the defined time periods, the number of advertisements for the sale of individual books vastly out-numbers other materials. From the distribution of advertisements across the publication history of *The Ladder*, it is clear that the changing editorial staff consistently favoured the advertisement of lesbian (and gay) literary materials. Thus, even without the inclusion of a book service, the editorial decision to include predominantly literary advertisements in the magazine indicates a strong literary emphasis in *The Ladder*. While the magazine cannot be labelled a literary magazine – and indeed it shouldn't, for the magazine encompassed many topics concerning pre-Stonewall lesbians – the arguably dominant literary component of *The Ladder* allows for their readership to be co-

Book Shop (Greenwich Village, NY), Avante Book Store (Pasadena, CA), Village Books (New York City), Cosmo Book Sales, and Memorial Book Shop. The audio material consisted of music by Lisa Ben (editor and writer of the first lesbian periodical, *Vice Versa*) and Pierre Louys' poetry read by "Cherise". Non-literary advertising consisted of a restaurant, an animal photographer, paintings made to order, a chiropractor, perfume samples, a gift shop, feminist lapel buttons, and a 'magic turban.'

¹¹² Here, *solitary advertisement* signifies the advertisement of an individual book, magazine, record, product, service, etc. This does not include the DOB book service lists as they appear in *The Ladder*. Non-literary advertisement appears 25 out of 157 solitary advertisements, while book advertisement appears in 90 out of 157 solitary advertisements. The advertisement of audio material has been included as a 'literary' classification, for the advertisement of records through *The Ladder* only included two different records: folk songs written and performed by Lisa Ben (editor of the first lesbian periodical, *Vice Versa*), and a recording of Pierre Louys' poetry read by "Cherise."

opted into an identifiable LTC. In other words, the advertisement and book service data help to identify the literary tastes of *The Ladder's* LTC.

The lack of sales figures from the DOB Book Service makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the financial support the service provided to *The Ladder*. Moreover, it would be difficult to ascertain the impact that the distribution of books had on the textual community through quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, by looking at the data that is available – i.e. the genre and subject matter of the books — it may be possible to make inferences about this textual community's educational and social demographic. In other words, while it is clear that the 'reading' component of *The Ladder's* textual community was predominantly lesbian, while including some gay men, heterosexual allies, and physicians, the interests of these sub-groups can be inferred through the availability of reading material offered through the DOB Book Service.

An examination of the titles offered through the DOB Book Service shows a wide variety of genres offered to readers of *The Ladder* (see Table 1.3). The offerings include fiction and non-fiction titles, poetry, bibliographies, academic journals, journalistic studies of lesbians, feminist studies, and books about homosexuality and religion. The range of available titles suggests that the readers of *The Ladder* had varied literary interests. However, data on the distribution of titles within each genre and the listing frequency (see Table 1.4) of each genre initially suggest that *The Ladder* readers preferred fiction books. The number of fiction titles offered by the DOB book service surpasses the number of titles offered in other genres combined – 33 fiction titles compared to 26 titles from the remaining genres. In terms of listing frequency, fiction made up 64 percent of the titles that appear in the DOB book service lists. The fiction genre alone can be divided into three sub-genres: lesbian pulp fiction novels,

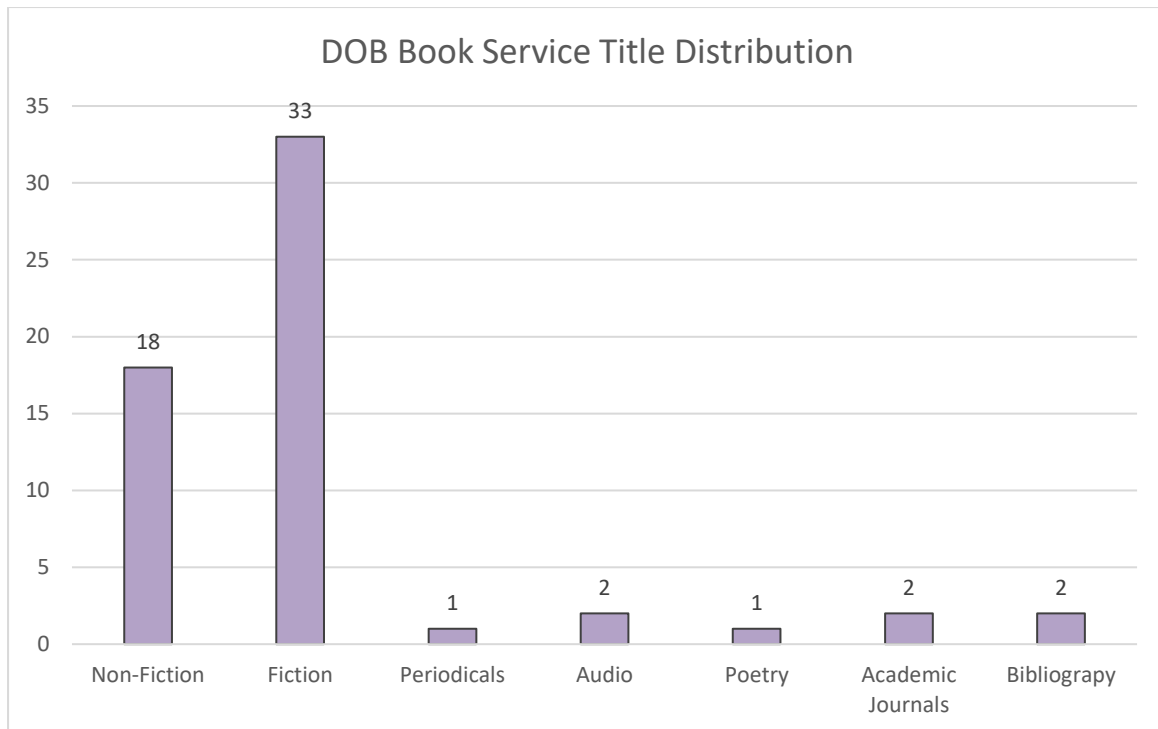


Table 1.3: The Distribution of Titles from the DOB Book Service Lists

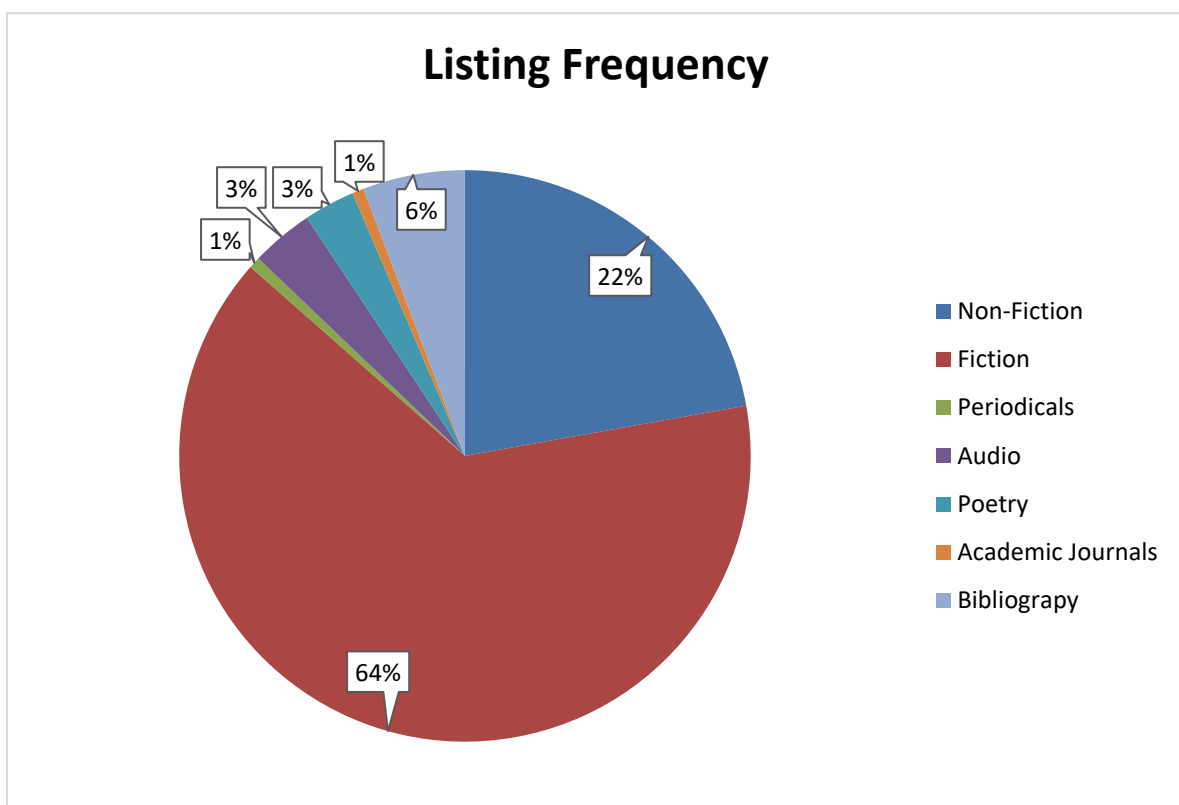


Table 1.4: Frequency of listed titles represented in DOB Book Service Lists.

short stories, and other novels. In the title distribution amongst fiction titles, there is a notable majority of lesbian pulp fiction novels offered by the DOB book service (see Table 1.5). If the frequency of listed titles is examined, the data support the inference that readers prefer lesbian pulp fiction titles over other fiction titles (see Table 1.6). The reason behind these reading preferences is difficult to know, due to the limited information available on both the sales figures from the DOB Book Service and supporting written historical documents explaining the reason behind the choice of title selection. Nevertheless, it can reasonably be inferred that the DOB Book Service made these titles available, based on reader-demand. As the book service itself was born from readers' requests, it is logical to assume that the DOB book service would not only make available texts that the staff approved of, but also offer the books that readers would have difficulty obtaining through major book sellers or through their local libraries.

If considering the inclusion of lesbian pulp fiction titles on the DOB Book Service list, this assumption may prove at least marginally accurate. As pulp novels, lesbian pulps were a part of a larger phenomenon that attracted a growing number of American readers. Pulp novels, as 'transient fiction', were almost exclusively available at newsstands, drug stores, bus depots, and train stations. While pulp readers could avoid the need to acquire pulp fiction through book sellers, as low-brow, disposable reading material, pulps would not enjoy the same cultural treatment as hard-bound books. According to Erin A Smith, pulp novels were not available through libraries, and book reviews of pulp titles did not appear in major newspapers.¹¹³ Thus, the status of pulp novels would have made it difficult for readers of *The Ladder* to find many of the pulps reviewed in the 'Lesbiana' column, especially if the individual

¹¹³ Erin A Smith.

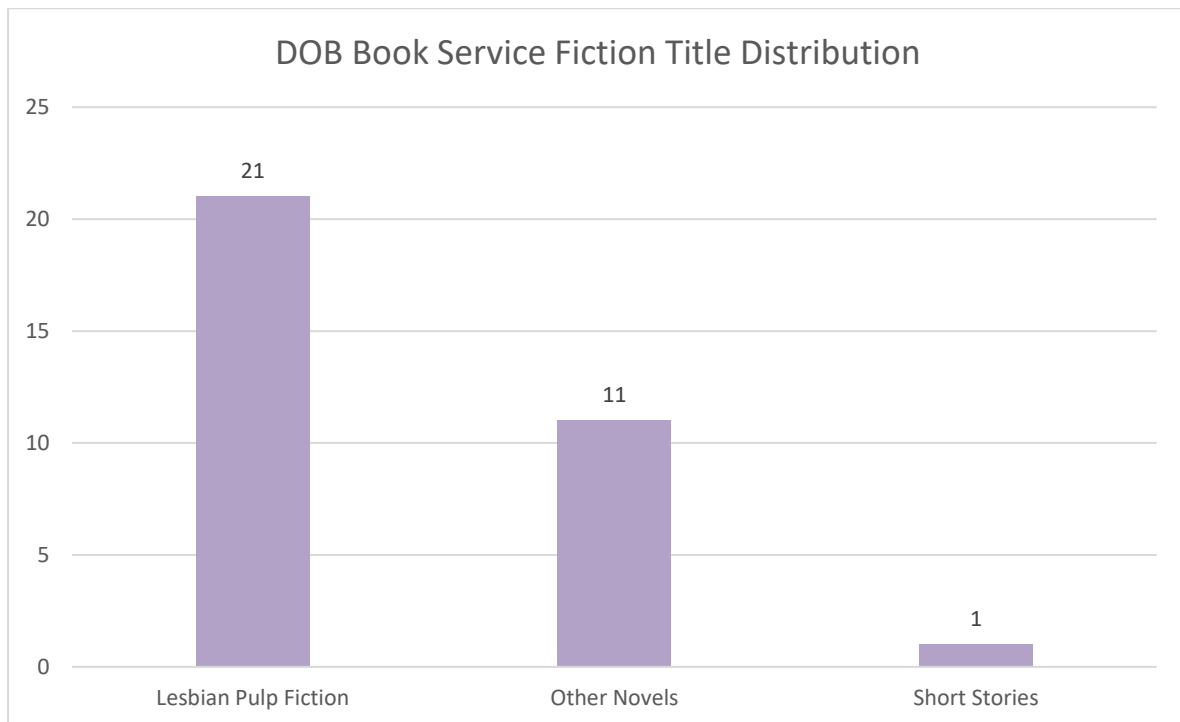


Table 1.5: Frequency of Genres sold through the DOB Book Service

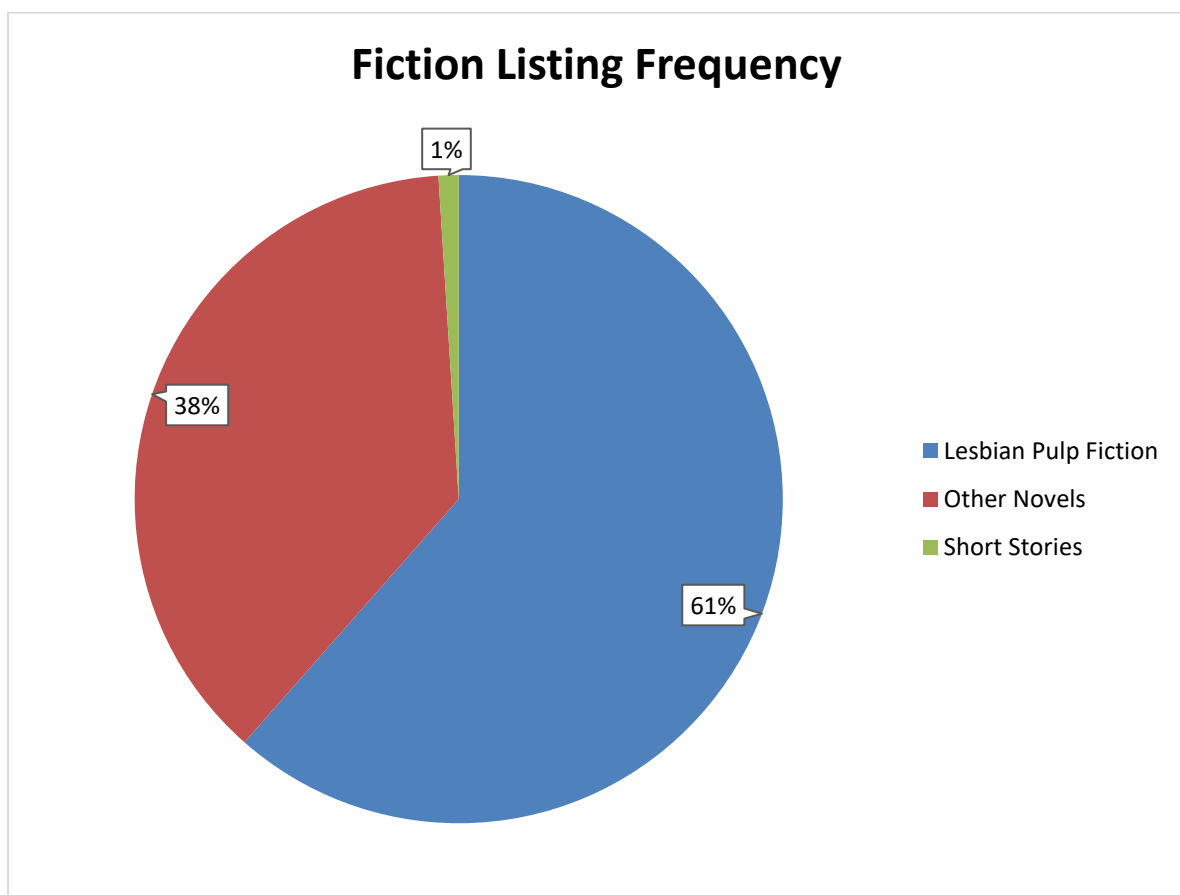


Table 1.6: Frequency of Genres sold through the DOB Book Service

reader lived in a small town. Therefore, the prevalence of lesbian-themed fiction – and specifically pulp fiction titles – leads to the assumption that the selectivity of the DOB Book Service was responding to the desires of a niche market comprised of members of a LTC.

4. Reader responses and literary discussion

Though this may have not been Grier's intent, through the dissemination of lesbian-themed titles, the 'Lesbiana' column connected lesbian readers with the means of identification through reading. The list itself often inspired discussions among readers and *Ladder* contributors on the quality of lesbian-themed texts available. Perhaps the most notable example of literary discussion came through an open conversation on the quality of popular fiction at the time.

In some cases, readers of *The Ladder* did not view lesbian pulp fiction favourably. One reader, identified as 'a subscriber' from New York, voices her disdain for the items listed in Grier's annual 'Lesbian Literature' list for 1963:¹¹⁴

Whom are you trying to help -- these low kinds of publishers, or yourselves?
By calling attention to the macabre ideas of what homosexuality is thought to be,
or hoped to be, as far as "normal" people are concerned, you lend credence to
their warped impressions [...]

¹¹⁴ In addition to 'Lesbiana,' Grier (as Gene Damon) wrote an annual column in *The Ladder* that served as a recap of lesbian literature published in the past year. Titles varied slightly between 'Lesbian Literature in [...]' and 'The Lesbian in Literature [...]' The letter by the New York subscriber references 'Lesbian Literature in 1963' in *The Ladder*, ed. Barbara Gittings, 8.5, (February 1964), 12 – 19.

I fear for the minds which will accept your list of 'Lesbian Literature' and think that you, as a homophile group, approve of such commercialism and distortion of the homosexual way of life. [...]

The lone cry against such books was a letter THE LADDER printed by D.C. of Michigan. But how about the rest of you? Do you rush to read this trash to see if it portrays you truly, or whether it portrays some of your friends in disguise? Do you even know or care how much of this trash is produced? I don't refer to the truly literate authors such as Paula Christian and Ann Bannon, but the (ugh!) Don Holidays, Peggy Swensons, Orrie Hitts, Jason Hytes and other often phoney-names creators of lust and perversion.¹¹⁵

The letter continues, highlighting the dangerous associations between homosexuality and depravity that were perpetuated by a majority of pulp fiction writers (and publishers) at the time. In this letter, we can clearly see a dialogue forming between reader and column writer. In referencing both a previous article and letter published in *The Ladder*, the New York subscriber challenges her fellow readers to think more critically about the 'lesbian literature' the market has provided for consumers, and she calls for a boycott of objectionable lesbian texts: 'You should refuse to buy such trash, to sell it, or to list it as "Lesbian Literature".'

Interestingly, Marion Zimmer Bradley's article, 'Lesbian Stereotypes in the Commercial Novel', appears in the same issue as the New York subscriber's letter.¹¹⁶ In the article, Zimmer Bradley notes that the majority of lesbian novels 'are written for a male audience' to satisfy a 'masculine interest in lesbians.'¹¹⁷ Moreover, she claims that 'the reader of sex fiction is typically a lower-middle-class man, whose fear of homosexuality (often

¹¹⁵ 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed Barbara Gittings, 8.12, (September 1964), 25-26.

¹¹⁶ Marion Zimmer Bradley, 'Lesbian Stereotypes in the Commercial Novel,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Barbara Gittings 8.12, (September 1964), 14-19. Zimmer Bradley is a noted and prolific science fiction writer. She also compiled her own mimeographed checklist of lesbian-themed texts, advertised to readers of *The Ladder*.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.14. I interpret her meaning here to reference a *heterosexual* masculine interest.

complicated by latent homosexual urges) amounts to panic.’ Additionally, Zimmer Bradley claims that female homosexuality in fiction presents itself as a less threatening topic to the male reader than male homosexuality because ‘he is unlikely to be mistaken for a lesbian.’ Bradley also claims that the proliferation of lesbian paperbacks contributes (positively) to the visibility of lesbian existence and normalizes lesbianism to ‘the average man in the street.’ Nevertheless, the stereotypes present in lesbian paperbacks presents a certain danger. She points out that ‘the serious intellectual can investigate without fear; but the reader of paperback fiction is seldom intellectual,’ insinuating that the stereotypes presented in paperback novels will go unquestioned by the majority of readers. The representation of lesbians as ‘ultra-feminine, abused, seductive, sex-starved, or neglected housewife,’ is unrealistic and in Bradley’s words, ‘sheer nonsense.’ Unlike the New York subscriber, Bradley does not advocate a boycott of the worst lesbian paperbacks; to her it is ‘useless’ because ‘the male readership would still be large enough to keep the publishing houses in operation.’ Instead, she recommends writing letters to publishers, quoting Kinsey and ‘scientific studies,’ and demanding more accurate representation of lesbians. In addition, she recommends, ‘some of those who care about the public image of lesbians might try writing lesbian novels,’¹¹⁸ and lists authors who have successfully contributed positive images of lesbians in fiction.¹¹⁹ What the New York subscriber’s letter and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s article demonstrate is the active dialogue carried out between readers and writers through the pages of *The Ladder*. Moreover, it demonstrates a consciousness about the lesbian-themed material available to lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s. What the aforementioned material also demonstrates is the willingness and desire to share that consciousness with others in order

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.14 and p.19.

¹¹⁹ Paula Christian, Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor, Miriam Gardener, Artemis Smith and Sloan Britian.

to demand changes from publishers of mass-produced paperback fiction. Moreover, Bradley's article and the letter reveal middle-class viewpoints through their value-laden judgements on 'trashy' literature.

Later issues of *The Ladder* readers, along with Grier, defend a select few authors of lesbian pulps. In the June/July 1969 issue of *The Ladder*, editors reprinted an article – 'The Lesbian Paperback' – by Grier (Gene Damon) that originally appeared in *Tangents Magazine* (June/July 1966). In the article Grier laments the end of the age of 'good' lesbian paper backs:

In 1966 it seems clear that the era of good Lesbian paperbacks is about over. The increased freedom in literary expression (ironically assisted by these paperbacks) has pretty thoroughly obliterated the need for paperback novels exclusively dealing with Lesbians. It is interesting, also to note that now that the Lesbian field is dying (at least those with some actual merit), the male homosexual paperback original is becoming a booming business. It will be enjoyable to watch the end of this trend as well, when the hardback field opens the way to more complete male homosexual novels.

The Good Lesbian Paperbacks served a definite purpose by satisfying vicariously the need for "happy endings" which are so often lacking in the more literate treatment of the subject. They also provided generally youthful, theoretically romantic figures and contemporary settings. To some extent they were responsible for better public relations with the general public.¹²⁰

Grier's article illustrates the sentimentality felt by many lesbian readers over the 'Golden Age' of lesbian pulp fiction.¹²¹ Grier's disappointment in the decline of lesbian paperbacks

¹²⁰ Gene Damon, 'The Lesbian Paperback,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 13.9 -10, (June/July 1969), 18-23, p.19.

¹²¹ As defined in the introduction of this thesis, see Yvonne Keller, "Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife So Passionately?": Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965, *American Quarterly*, 57.2, (2005), 385-410.

reemerges in several issues. For example, in the September 1967 issue, the 'Lesbiana' Column features Grier's dissatisfaction.¹²² Additionally, readers often felt the same way. For example, one reader's letter in the June/July 1969 issue echo's Grier's disappointment; L.B. from Cleveland, Ohio wrote:

I have seen no mention recently at all of the Olde Garde: Ann Bannon, Paula Christian, Valerie Taylor, et al. What's happened? Have they stopped writing, or have you stopped writing about them? Dreadful as some of the books were, they were still better than most on the subject, and I'll have a soft spot in my heart always for Ann Bannon, who gave me the terms and assurance I needed when I didn't know there was anyone else like me in the world. ¹²³

In response to the letter, the editor replies: 'Many readers have inquired about the death of good Lesbian paperback fiction. We all regret it, but current publishing trends in the paperback field are to put out as much pornography as possible with as little space wasted on character as can be managed.'¹²⁴ This response to L.B. highlights that while there is a sense of loss over the 'olde garde,' there is not much to be done about the 'current publishing trends,' and the LTC has little to no power over mainstream publishing.

Despite the objections to pornography by some readers and contributors, others defended the existence of lesbian pornographic material in the mass market. In the December 1969/January 1970 issue, 'F.B.' from New Jersey queries the editors:

I wonder whether you realize that many psychologists and psychiatrists feel that there is a useful place for pornography that you seem so quickly to dismiss? Fantasy may be all that some of us have at times of separation. Fantasy may be all

¹²² 'There is no really good paperback originals around anymore. I can't help wondering what happened to Valerie Taylor, Paula Christian, Ann Bannon, etc.' Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 11.11, (September 1967), 11-14, p.12.

¹²³ 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 13. 9-10, (June/July 1969), 44-45, p.45.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

that a few have much of the time [...] Vicarious experience is the only reason for any written material. Why then should the censor's pen eliminate the reality and substitute for it a mealy-mouth suggestion?¹²⁵

In the June/July 1970 issue, 'J.L.' from Texas further defends lesbian pornographic material, but in a broader sense than lesbian paperbacks:

Now, the times I have identified with lesbians in either literature, movies (like "The Fox"), photographic sequences, I have experienced such dramatic release and relief (from guilt?) that it's apparent I'm getting more than vicarious experience. I *need* to read good lesbian literature, and with the inclusion of erotic scenes; I *need* to see pictures of lesbians together -- tasteful pictures --; and I need to see "Gay is o.k." on the screen -- for my own sanity! [...]

And so I say that no matter how poor the pornography, no matter how tasteless the advertising, how negative the attention from the various media, right now it all has value. Cultural awareness and acknowledgement provide some kind of mirroring for us, and even a distorted mirror is better than no mirror at all. Surely the mirror will become less distorted as awareness of homosexuality and its validity as a human experience grows, and cultural consciousness is penetrated by positive acceptance and not mere curiosity and then indifference.¹²⁶

In these letters, F.B. and J.L. raise the discussion of pornographic material and censorship. Both readers question the assumption that the most explicit and pornographic of lesbian-themed media is of no value to the lesbian reader and only appeals to voyeuristic heterosexual male readers. Moreover, the letters highlight the aspect of reading (or watching) that creates a personal experience for the reader. In J.L.'s case, there is a positive experience of psychological relief from viewing lesbians in positive sexual context. Both F.B. and J.L.'s argument provides examples of multiple viewpoints on lesbian representation being shared

¹²⁵ 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 14. 3-4, (December 1969 / January 1970), 35-38, p.36.

¹²⁶ 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Gene Damon, 14. 9-10, (June/July 1970), 41-46, p.41.

through *The Ladder*, evidence that there was not only active discussion and debate, but changing attitudes towards the media available to lesbian audiences at the time. These active discussions provide hard evidence that a textual community did exist within *The Ladder's* readership, and that this textual community was not politically stagnant and simply 'integrationist.'

'Lesbiana' was not a constant feature in *The Ladder*. Though it was a frequent column, it did not appear in every issue and the number of titles reviewed in each column ranged from two to ten. Despite this inconsistency, there is evidence to suggest that readers in the 1950s and 1960s valued the column. Of the readers who wrote in, many found its inclusion in *The Ladder* to be a positive contribution. For example, in the December 1957 issue, 'D.M.' from Fall River, Massachusetts, notes her interest 'in all books on Lesbianism' and names *Wind Woman* among her favoured titles. While the published excerpts of this letter in 'Readers Respond' do not directly mention 'Lesbiana', D.M.'s apparent fondness for lesbian-themed texts illustrate the demand for information on new and hard-to-find titles.¹²⁷ Support for the title 'Lesbiana' also appears in 'Reader Response.' One letter sent in by M.L. from West Warrick, Rhode Island, mentions that she and her friend are fond of the title: 'Both of us like the term 'Lesbiana' and hope you don't change it.'¹²⁸ Another letter from 'Lady Kay' in New York City urges *The Ladder's* staff to keep the name 'Lesbiana' because she claims that 'Lesbian is a name honored down the centuries among great civilisations' and that 'In the ancient world a Lesbian was an aristocrat, a free, cultured person, respected and admired by every class.' In letters like those from D.M., ML, and 'Lady Kay' we can see how the readers associate 'Lesbiana' with high culture, high thinking, and intellectual validity. Moreover, the

¹²⁷ 'Readers Respond', *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 2.3, (December 1958), 23-25, p.23.

¹²⁸ Readers Respond', *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 2.10 (June 1958), 19-26, pp.24-26

readers legitimise lesbian identity through historical means, in the same way that the DOB identified with Sappho and Bilitis. This act of legitimising lesbian identity through ancient Greek traditions is problematic, however, for the fact that it elevates lesbian identity in a classist manner. Through identifying lesbianism in aristocratic and classical terms, Lady Kay's letter confines lesbian identity to an upper-class image, appealing to American middle-class sentiment. These middle-class values, in the context of the 1950s, are also inherently white. Thus, letters like Lady Kay's and the overall image of lesbians supported by the DOB devalue the identity of working-class lesbians and lesbians of colour throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Further support came from readers like 'M.H' in Illinois, D.C. in Texas, and H.D. in California. In the same set of letters published in January 1960, all three readers asked for some form of expansion of the 'Lesbiana' section and asked if there was any way for *The Ladder* to better connect readers with the much-desired books about lesbians. It is perhaps letters like these that inspired the DOB to start its own book service, as announced in May 1960 and advertised in subsequent issues.

The readers' responses were not always positive, however. As time went on more letters were being published that criticised the quality of *The Ladder*. Letters featuring heavy critique were published along with letters that applauded the efforts of the volunteer staff. Two letters in the November 1960 issue voice the consternation of L.P. and M.D. in California. Both readers strongly disagree with Grier's review of *The Young and Innocent*. L.P. even suggests that Grier was only 'trying to sell for the DOB Book Service,' criticizing the potentially commercial motives of the editors, rather than the quality of the magazine. Furthermore, letters appearing in the early '60s begin lamenting the negative depiction of lesbians in popular fiction. One letter published March 1963 and signed 'Neva Moore' reads: 'I am tired

of reading books of tragedy about Lesbianism. I am tired of publishers who believe they can put out a book filled with the most pornographic interludes between two women, if at the end of the book they prove that this brought them both into hell and damnation.’ Another letter published July 1963 from EW in Indiana asks ‘why most of Lesbian fiction portray[s] women who love one another as being sexually promiscuous, unrefined, and profane’ ending her letter with hopes that the DOB and *The Ladder* will do what they can to improve the literary image of lesbians and ‘the quality of Lesbian Fiction.’

One conversation in the pages of *The Ladder* provides insight into the aims of the magazine and the ways in which the lesbian textual community of *The Ladder* participated in a discussion over the ethics of lesbian-themed publications and the socially didactic potential of Lesbiana. This discussion appeared primarily in the ‘Readers Respond’ column, but was started over Valerie Taylor’s letter critiquing an article by Lennox Strong (one of the pseudonyms used by Barbara Grier) and Terri Cook published in the November 1966 Issue: ‘Poetry of Lesbiana.’¹²⁹ The article in question discussed ‘poetry most properly termed variant, i.e., subtle evocations of love between women, most often without overt expression.’ Of the discussed poets, the following are perhaps the most high-profile examples: Emily Dickinson, Hilda Doolittle, and Edna St Vincent Millay. Written in a pseudo-academic register, the article establishes the place of poetry in western culture:

Fiction is said to be the dramatized reflection of the mores of the time. Poetry, a much more intimate expression, is the soul of the poet – an intense examination of his needs, fears, impressions and hopes. It is the most beautiful of

¹²⁹ Lennox Strong and Terri Cook, ‘Poetry of Lesbiana,’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 11. 2, (November 1966), 20-29.

the written arts, and the least understood, requiring patience and compassion from the reader [...]

Many poets have written about Lesbian Love. The male poets have, perhaps rightly, primarily confined themselves to expressing this in terms of sexuality or of hatred. The female poets speak in softer terms for the most part, using emotional reaction in place of overt sexuality to delineate experience. Some of them resort to disguise by eliminating or changing personal pronouns; but the practiced ear soon learns to distinguish the difference and to identify that touch with says clearly, “for women only.”¹³⁰

In the opening paragraphs, Strong and Cook use language and descriptions of the poetic form that invoke academic or critical thinking from the reader. The aim of the article – perhaps similar to the aims of the ‘Lesbiana’ column – seems to be an informative piece about the scope of lesbian-themed poetry. The notions of poetic value utilised by Strong and Cook elevate poetry above prose in poetry’s ability to access and express emotions. Moreover, Strong and Cook argue that inherent in poetry’s nature is an ability to ‘disguise’ or ‘code’ the emotional components of sexuality, which was often required in certain time periods, including the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, in masking overt sexual themes in ‘softer terms,’ poetry, as viewed by Strong and Cook, would appeal to the lesbian representational politics of the DOB and *The Ladder* in desexualising same-sex love and perhaps enabling mainstream heterosexual societies to connect with the human emotion behind homosexuality.

Despite the lofty aims of the article, Strong and Cook’s essay dips into an insulting register with their paragraph about the poet Amy Lowell:

Amy Lowell, ugly and fat, and overgrown toad, who smoked cigars and slapped backs. Amy Lowell, ugly and fat, died a little each day for love and loved hopelessly

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp.20-21.

in life. Fortunately she was not silent and she left behind a glorious record of that love which dares more and more to speak its name.¹³¹

Though Strong and Cook end their assessment of Amy Lowell in positive terms, the twice repeated commentary on her appearance jars when juxtaposed with the opening paragraphs and high praise of her poetry. These comments were found objectionable by Valerie Taylor, who wrote to *The Ladder* to express her outrage in a letter published in the June 1967 issue of *The Ladder*:

What does call for comment is a series of gratuitous insults to Amy Lowell [...] Miss Lowell was fat, true, and she smoked cigars. She was far from ugly – massively well proportioned, with a pleasant face, as can be seen from the several photographs of her that are in existence. She was not a back-slapper, but a dignified and reticent woman. “Died a little each day for love” is an inexcusable Victorian sentimentality. All of us die a little each day, but Miss Lowell died eventually of double hernia and kidney trouble complicated by glandular malfunctioning. Real life is so unromantic.¹³²

In this section of the letter, Taylor highlights the needless use of sentimental terms and insulting language in Strong and Cook’s paragraph on Lowell. Instead of brief critical analysis on Lowell’s work, Strong and Cook opted for pseudo-biographical information. Taylor makes further criticisms in her letter, calling into question the assumptions Strong and Cook infer about the sexuality of the poets included in their list:

One grows a little tired of these evaluations in which one line out of a hundred or a thousand is seized upon to prove that so-and-so is one of us. Until homosexuals stop insisting that they are a persecuted minority on one hand and an elite on the other and recognize that their sexual orientation is only one phase of personality

¹³¹ Ibid. p.22

¹³² ‘Readers Respond’, in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 11. 8, (June 1967), 21-22, p.21.

-- and a private one at that -- they are not going to be, as THE LADDER puts it, integrated into society.¹³³

Taylor's response here highlights the tensions felt within lesbian representational politics of the time. Taylor appears to advocate a move away from placing emphasis on lesbian themes in poetic review, or perhaps even in the subject matter of the magazine. Instead, Taylor advocates this strategy in the interests of integration, which is in agreement with the 'Purpose of the Daughters of Bilitis' published on the inside cover of the magazine.¹³⁴ For those like Taylor, publishing reviews of poetry that focus specifically on the lesbian theme draws attention to lesbianism. She adamantly disagrees with the simultaneous 'victimisation' and 'elitism' she perceives within lesbian representational politics. Given that the article and the response were published amidst the sexual revolution in the US, Taylor's agreement for desexualised reviews in *The Ladder* represents a more conservative resistance to concepts of sexual freedom supported by the Beat generation of the late '50s and the hippy movement. For Taylor, integration into mainstream society is impossible so long as *The Ladder* and other lesbians overtly discuss lesbian themes. Ultimately, Taylor expresses much frustration over the messages – inherent and explicit – delivered through Strong and Cook's article on Lesbiana poetry. Though not in explicit terms, Taylor seems to advocate the academic and critical study of poetry and literature without making inferences about the sexual orientation of the author. Moreover, published below the letter was a note from the editor, Helen Sanders, distancing the editorial staff from the dramatic disagreement between Taylor and

¹³³ Ibid p.22

¹³⁴ 'Education of the Lesbian, enabling her to understand herself and to make her adjustment to society in its social, civic, and economic implications.' *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 11. 8, (June 1967), Inside Cover.

Strong and Cook.¹³⁵ As Gene Damon and Lennox Strong are both Barbara Grier, the 'arbitration' of the conflict was biased.

Strong and Cook responded to Taylor in a letter appearing in the September 1967 issue:

It is impossible to resist replying to Valerie Taylor's excellent critical letter in the June issue of THE LADDER [...]

We both sincerely apologize to you, Miss Taylor if you feel we meant to insult Amy Lowell. On the contrary, we both ardently admire her work, and pity her many unhappy hours. Regardless of the physical ailments which ended her life, her poetry reflects an insistent unhappiness at her obesity and an intense preoccupation with androgynous beauty. It is very true that Ada Russell lived many long loving years with Amy Lowell, as has been recorded by her many biographers. Despite this, Miss Lowell records an astonishing amount of unrequited love in her poetry and often ties it to the "willow shape" which eluded her in life. [...]

Again, we must point out that the scope of the article in question was just what the title implied: "Poetry of Lesbiana." Obviously we weren't trying to say that every author who has written Lesbian poetry is a Lesbian - since some 10 cited are males, this would be rather silly. [...]

Lastly, your major point has not been missed. You argue, in effect, that you would rather have had an article on poetry without orientation references. Fine; but THE LADDER is not the place for it. The way Lesbians become 'integrated' into society is not to pass as heterosexuals. Passing as white doesn't often work for the Negro; nor does name changing alter a Jew. Lesbians have the double jeopardy

¹³⁵ 'Oh, dear! This is a battle we can't referee, on grounds of total ignorance. After all we had to join the DOB to learn much more than "bar literature," and as for poetry, we wrote one once (a poem, that is) just to see if it could be done and when it was published we returned to the printing and publishing business. We will turn this over to Gene Damon to arbitrate since she has kindly consented to be our Poetry Editor in addition to her wonderful work on LESBIANA.' From 'Readers Respond', in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 11. 8, (June 1967), 21-22, p.21.

responsibility shared by members of all minorities. They must contribute on two levels; as citizens of the world first, then as Lesbians.

May we, by the way, take this opportunity to tell you how much we admire your contribution to the genre of Lesbian Literature, and to hope there will someday be another Valerie Taylor novel?¹³⁶

The tone of Strong and Cook's letter is particularly interesting. While it is clear that they both disagree with her criticisms, the tone of the letter infers that Strong and Cook respect Valerie Taylor as an author, for they pay her due reverence in writing that her critique was 'excellent' and by explicitly conveying their admiration for her lesbian pulp novels. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the letter falls to the discussion of what material should and should not be published in *The Ladder*. As Strong and Cook's rebuttal states, *The Ladder* is not the place for articles on poetry without reference to lesbian themes. In the sentence on lesbian integration – 'The way Lesbians become 'integrated' into society is not to pass as heterosexuals' – Strong and Cook imply that by ignoring the lesbian theme, any articles on poetry published in *The Ladder* would be culpable of participating in what Terry Castle calls the 'ghosting' of lesbians in media.¹³⁷ Given the particular moment in time in which this discussion was published, Strong and Cook's disagreement with Taylor highlights a shift in ways in which minorities sought equal rights.¹³⁸ Strong and Cook make particular reference to the failure of 'passing' in modern society as a means of integration. This particular

¹³⁶ 'Readers Respond' in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 11.11, (September 1967), 20-21.

¹³⁷ Terry Castle, *The Apartitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.2.

¹³⁸ Within the contemporaneous Civil Rights Movement: The Black Panthers were formed the year before, and in the same year, Stokely Carmichael coined the term 'Black Power' and race riots broke out in Newark and Detroit. The following year, Martin Luther King, Jr. would be assassinated. The late '60s marked a turning point in activism; it is at this time that the ethos of 'pride' in one's identity begins to be incorporated into political movements.

statement highlights the changing attitudes of *The Ladder's* readers and members of the DOB; more than a decade earlier, the DOB seemed to advocate for integration into society's white, middle-class ideology, but in the late 1960s, even the review of lesbian-themed poetry is politicised.

Further support for Strong and Cook's rebuttal comes from a letter written to the editor (Helen Sanders) by author Jane Rule. Rule's letter, published in the December 1967 issue, admits that she had missed reading Valerie Taylor's letter, but lauds Strong and Cook's 'careful research' and 'arch gallantry' in their defence against Taylor's complaints. Nevertheless, Rule provides suggestions in an attempt to mediate the differences presented by Taylor, Strong and Cook:

Lennox Strong and Terri Cook are right to protest that *The Ladder* is no place for general articles on poetry, but surely there is a happy compromise between the kind of reviewing THE LADDER now offers its readers and general literary reviews. For novels, stories, and poems in the Lesbian field which are serious and accomplished works, there could be reviews not simply concerned with the number of pages devoted to Lesbian scenes but instead with intelligent consideration for the insights and techniques. For material of interest only because of its subject matter, surely even briefer notes than are now supplied by Gene Damon would do. One of the problems for a writer who deals with Lesbian experience is that the general press continues to treat such work only for what is considered "sensational subject matter." When a Lesbian magazine not only imitates but exaggerates such distortions, it does nothing for the cause it professes. General reviews of good books that are Lesbian in content would improve the quality of the magazine, minimize criticism that it is simply an advertising vehicle for specialized pornography, discourage none of its present readers, and perhaps attract a larger audience and more contributions.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 12.1, (December 1967), 30-31.

In this letter, we can see how Rule advocates a compromise between the conflicting views presented in the two letters. Rule agrees that as a lesbian magazine, *The Ladder* should indeed review lesbian-themes content. However, as she argues later in her letter, 'Sexual orientation in a book, as in a person, is only part of its value.' In other words, while *The Ladder* should support works that have a lesbian theme, the magazine should also evaluate *some* texts on their merits as works of literature. Thus, Rule advocates a two-tiered approach to evaluating Lesbiana, including high and low culture for the benefit of the readers. Rule's suggestion moreover seems to advocate for an attempt to expose readers to literary critique, perhaps with didactic aims for the *The Ladder's* LTC; this suggestion would not only appeal to the readers who were already discerning readers, but might also help to draw more individual readers into the discussion of lesbian literary aesthetics.

As the discussion continues, however, it is clear that Damon/Strong would not agree with Rule's intent for the literary component of *The Ladder*. In the following issue – January 1968 – Gene Damon responded to Jane Rule, expressing her regret that Rule had missed Taylor's letter and the original article: 'It helps, sometimes, to read the material you review, defend, or to which you object before commenting.'¹⁴⁰ Damon (Strong) then proceeds to give her opinion on the subject:

The literary review is meant to reach a select audience: the specialized reader, often a lifetime academic student of literature, or another writer. Its purpose is to discuss style and theme and goals and the success or lack thereof in these general areas. Extraneous considerations such as plot, place or setting, time, characterization (with some exceptions), and the successful handling of the subject matter or the novel (if any), are often left out of literary reviews.

¹⁴⁰ 'Readers Respond' in *The Ladder*, ed. Helen Sanders, 12. 2, (January 1968), 28-30, p. 29.

On the other hand, the ordinary reader who reads for personal pleasure is not likely to be much concerned with the points dear to the academic heart. [...]

Most of all, the reader reads for the story – the plot – and however sad that makes most writers, it is an inescapable fact of life. It's the plot, the action, that appeals.¹⁴¹

For Damon, the main goal for the 'Lesbiana' column is to appeal to the 'general' lesbian reader. This reader is indeed a lesbian, but she is not necessarily academically inclined, nor is she necessarily interested in the subject of literary aesthetics when it comes to selecting reading material. Moreover, Damon's letter explicitly states that she is conscious of her 'general' audience and their specific interest in reading material that accurately and positively represents lesbian experience. On occasion, the books reviewed may have been of 'good' literary quality; but as Damon points out, the assessment of writing quality is a 'value judgement,' which she leaves to the readers to pass on the selected reading material. As this section has shown, the inclusion of literary materials and the discussion of literary aesthetics was indeed in the mind of the editorial staff of *The Ladder* and amongst the reader contributors, who made up this specific lesbian textual community.

Taken individually, the letters either support or denounce the texts that appear in 'Lesbiana,' but viewed as a collection, the letters suggest a variety of literary preferences amongst the readers of *The Ladder*. Moreover, the letters published in *The Ladder* indicate the demand for literary works that appeal to more than voyeurism. Before, the LTC may have simply been satisfied to read any text containing information on lesbianism, be it positive or negative. As the period moves inexorably toward the age of Gay Liberation in the 1970s, the lesbian readership of *The Ladder* demonstrated, in many ways, their need for more sources

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

of positive lesbian identification. Through these letters, it becomes clear that the LTC surrounding *The Ladder* functions much like other textual communities. As Fuller argues, textual communities 'are various, intersecting, and in a constant state of flux as they adapt to the needs of their members.'¹⁴² Thus, through the letters we can see how the members of this particular textual community have been given published space to voice their concerns and needs for changes to be made in the way lesbians were represented in print media.

5. Conclusions

Through the evidence printed in *The Ladder's* pages, it is possible to see that the members of this LTC were given access to information on a variety of lesbian-themed media. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of books (and of what genre) members of this LTC read as a result of the 'Lesbiana' column and the DOB Book Service, it is possible to conclude that members had varied tastes in regards to lesbian literary content. Moreover, through the 'Readers Respond' column, we can see that the readers who did participate in *The Ladder's* LTC were vocal about their opinions on the literary content of *The Ladder* and actively participated in discussions about reading and the representation of lesbians in the media. Moreover, the ways in which member of this LTC engaged with their reading materials shows a consciousness and concern about the politics of lesbian representation through popular media.

However the individual reader might feel about the texts suggested in 'Lesbiana,' the mere existence of this collection of texts was indeed valuable to readers of lesbian-themed

¹⁴² Fuller, p.90

texts during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. What the contents of *The Ladder* provide us with is only one piece of a larger lesbian history. Reading *The Ladder* today can only provide a glimpse into the literary habits of one group of lesbians during the 1950s and 1960s. Though Gallo has described the DOB as racially inclusive to lesbians of colour, the members still participated in class exclusion, albeit inadvertently. As D’Emilio argues, ‘When a lesbian identity did finally emerge [in the 1950s], it came from two distinct sources, one middle class and the other working class, reflecting the disparity in women’s existence in the nineteenth century.’¹⁴³ Because the DOB took on an initially integrationist strategy in their group politics and advocated feminine appearance compatible with a middle-class image, their ability to appeal to a working-class demographic was limited. This is not to say that working-class lesbians *did not* read *The Ladder*, but there is little evidence to suggest that they did. Nevertheless, it is important to study *The Ladder* not just in political terms, but in literary terms. Today, with the prevalent use of the internet, it is easy to locate a book on lesbian themes in the privacy of our own homes. However, locating lesbian texts in the 1950s and 1960s required more effort and had more risk associated with the task. Thus, in a pre-digital age, *The Ladder* was able to publicly share information, including book titles, with readers who still had to conceal their lesbian identity. Therefore, through *The Ladder*, lesbian readers were not only able to access information on lesbians, but able to forge connections through the pages of the magazine. Lesbian readers of *The Ladder* could actively engage and participate in a reading, writing LTC. This all-in-one lesbian magazine made it possible for lesbian readers and authors to discuss and review lesbian-themed media, which would not have been possible without this magazine. While other lesbian periodicals began to appear

¹⁴³ D’Emilio, p.94.

in the 1970s, for a decade and a half *The Ladder* fostered connections and provided opportunities for lesbian readers to discover new lesbian themed titles. The magazine and its readers also actively engaged with other lesbian readers across the US and (where possible) the world. These connections would later lead to the formation of Naiad Press, Barbara Grier's publishing company in the 1980s, and the formation of further lesbian textual communities in the United States.

The presence of *The Ladder* and its prominence within lesbian literary history must not be forgotten or left to sit in the archives of California universities without further consideration. The goal of this chapter has been to illustrate this importance and the impact *The Ladder* had on the course of lesbian literature in the United States. Because *The Ladder* played an important role in the discussion of lesbian-themed media in pre-Stonewall America, it provides us with a lens through which we can reconsider lesbian pulp fiction as more than throw-away fiction. From the evidence present in *The Ladder* it is clear that this LTC was aware of representational politics and how representations of lesbian experience could influence public opinion and how these representations might either help or harm lesbian readers. These readers did not passively accept the lesbian narratives delivered to them through mainstream media, but, as my analysis of *The Ladder* above demonstrates, they actively read and responded to these texts. The lens of *The Ladder's* LTC brings into focus the issues important to its members and what bearing their thoughts had on their reading experiences with lesbian pulp novels. Moreover, through the lens of this specific LTC we are able to answer the following questions about Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* and Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*: How did *The Ladder's* LTC receive the evaluated lesbian pulp? The author's larger body of work? What stereotypes are present and/or formed by the narrative? How are

lesbians portrayed in the pulp novel? What inherent or explicit messages come through the text? Having these questions in mind, it is possible to view lesbian pulp fiction novels outside of the category of 'throw-away fiction'.

In the following chapters, I will closely examine the work of Vin Packer (in Chapter 2) and Ann Bannon (in Chapters 3 and 4) with this lens in mind. In what ways might lesbian readers at the time have accessed and responded to lesbian pulp fiction, despite their 'unhappy endings' and questionable representation of lesbians? In what ways could lesbian readers 'read between the lines' and read beyond the homophobic nature of some paperbacks? What value did this 'trashy' and 'cheap' genre have for its lesbian readers? In Chapter Two, I will use my established lens of *The Ladder's* LTC to contextualise *Spring Fire* (1952) within Packer's reputation with this group of readers and to analyse the implicit subversive messages inherent in her text. Chapter Three uses *Spring Fire* as a comparison point for Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* (1957) and examines the explicit criticisms of mainstream American sexual ideology present in the text. Finally, Chapter Four examines Bannon's butch character, Beebo Brinker, and her characterisation across the remainder of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*.

Chapter Two

'No Legitimacy': *Spring Fire* and Subversive Commentary

I have just finished reading the story 'Spring Fire' by Vin Packer and I was truly disappointed in it.

It seems that nearly every book that I have read on the Lesbian theme has an unhappy or tragic ending. It would be a pleasure to read a story that has a happy ending. I am certain that there are many friends who love one another and live together, who experience true happiness -- who are not frustrated or feel so maladjusted as many writers of Lesbian novels would make the reader believe.

- E.W., Indiana¹

It is a sad state of affairs when an admitted Lesbian must continuously and vituperatively denounce Lesbianism...

- Gene Damon, in "Lesbiana"²

As illustrated in the last chapter, Lesbian pulp fiction played an important role in the lesbian textual community (LTC) of *The Ladder*. These titles and their suitability for lesbian readers were the subject of many debates amongst readers and contributors alike. Of the lesbian pulp novels represented in *The Ladder*, only a few authors were found to have written what Barbara Grier called 'good lesbian paperbacks' to add to the personal libraries of *The Ladder's* readers. Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952), while considered to be a genre defining paperback original, was not considered one of these 'good' paperbacks.¹ During *The Ladder's*

¹ 'Readers Respond' in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 3.5, (February, 1959), 24-25, pp.24-25.

² Gene Damon, "Lesbiana" in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 3.4, January 1959, 16.

publication, the work of Marijane Meaker³ – writing under the names Vin Packer and Ann Aldrich – was contentious amongst the magazine’s staff. The first lesbian paperback, *Spring Fire*, was never directly reviewed in *The Ladder*, save for the above letter from E.W. of Indiana. This letter was published seven years after the publication of *Spring Fire*. The second excerpt from ‘Lesbiana’, written about Packer’s novel *The Evil friendship* (1958), illustrates a pattern in the reception of Meaker’s overall body of work – both her fiction written as Vin Packer, and her non-fiction publications written as Ann Aldrich.

Before engaging in a close reading of *Spring Fire*, it is important to take *The Ladder*’s LTC into consideration. To contextualise *Spring Fire* and its reception by lesbian readers of *The Ladder*, it is important to establish Packer/Aldrich’s literary identity, detailing her reputation as an author within the literary field of lesbian-themed publications. In reviewing the reception of Packer/Meaker’s larger body of work through this particular lens we can begin to understand the ways in which this group of readers thought critically about Packer’s portrayal of lesbians in her first title. As this chapter will show, the reception of Packer/Aldrich’s work was far from favourable. Members of *The Ladder*’s LTC despised Packer/Aldrich’s work and felt that her portrayal of lesbians in both her fiction and non-fiction writing presented the public with stereotypes about lesbian women that worked against the DOB’s mission of acceptance and education. Taking the objections of *The Ladder*’s LTC into consideration, and using close reading, I argue that it becomes possible to redeem *Spring Fire* (1952) from its status as a ‘trashy’ work of fiction. As I show later in this chapter, Vin Packer would have been working around many restrictions imposed by both publishers and the laws

³ Meaker wrote under several pseudonyms across her career also including M. E. Kerr, Mary James, and Laura Winston. For the Purposes of this chapter, I will refer to Meaker as both Aldrich and Packer in relation to the respective works written under those names.

against obscenity. Through closely reading *Spring Fire*, I show the ways in which the text participates in the critique of social mores around sex, sexuality and dating practices in the United States at the time. Moreover, I highlight the ways in which the text engages with changing social stereotypes of lesbianism, femininity, and the female body.

1. Ann Aldrich's feud with *The Ladder* and lesbian representational politics in the 1950s

Between 1955 and 1972, Aldrich wrote non-fiction journalistic books about lesbians - *We Walk Alone* (1955), *We, Too, Must Love* (1958), *We Two Won't Last* (1963), and *Take a Lesbian to Lunch* (1972) - and compiled an anthology of essays - *Carol in a Thousand Cities* (1960)—on 'The twilight woman - as she sees herself, and as she is seen through the eyes of others.'⁴ Aldrich's role as a lesbian writer was the topic of much debate and frustration from readers of *The Ladder*. In a 1987 interview for the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Barbara Grier (Gene Damon) was asked to recall the feud between Aldrich and *The Ladder*. According to Grier, Aldrich's work reflected the well-established homophobic mind-set of mainstream society in the 1950s and 1960s. The impact of Aldrich's 'anti-lesbian' work, according to Grier, was that Aldrich's books on lesbians acted as an affirmation of mainstream homophobic fears; in other words, because Aldrich was 'very well published,' the impact of the self-hating and 'negative crap' (Grier's words) she published in *We Walk Alone* and *We, Too, Must Love* only reinforced lesbian stereotypes and supported the ideology that lesbians were social

⁴ From the cover text of the 1960s printing of *Carol in a Thousand Cities*.

deviants.⁵ Whether or not Aldrich's work was indeed homophobic is debatable. However, the degree to which Aldrich's journalism disseminates lesbian stereotypes is not the focus of this section, though it may provide further insight into Aldrich's role within a wider lesbian textual community.⁶

The first mention of Aldrich's work appears in the June 1957 volume of *The Ladder*. Aldrich's first book, *We Walk Alone* (1955) appears in the 'Lesbiana' column; the text below the book's publication information directs readers to a longer 'review' of the book. The review column, 'Aldrich "Walks Alone"' takes the form of a summary report on a 'public discussion' held by the DOB in May 1957. Focusing on comments made by Del Martin and Helen Sanders, the unknown author states that *We Walk Alone* is considered 'controversial' amongst members of the DOB. Though the book is identified as controversial, the review presents the DOB as being of one mind in their opinions of Aldrich's journalistic attempt to reveal lesbian identity to the general public. Overall, the review sees Aldrich's attempt as a failure: 'for all Miss Aldrich's good intentions she did not achieve her purpose and failed to balance her more bizarre examples of Lesbianism with those who have attained adjustment and are useful, productive citizens in today's society.'⁷ Sander's language here, and the language in the remainder of the article, objects to a particular image of lesbians as they were represented in popular media – both in lesbian pulp fiction, and in non-fiction publications in the 1950s and early 1960s. According to Martin Meeker, Sander's assessment of Aldrich's work and the

⁵ In the 1987 interview, Grier mentions that Aldrich had reversed her ideas about lesbians later in life, but at the time, she was considered an 'anti-lesbian lesbian' as evinced through her books.

⁶ A 'wider lesbian textual community' would over-lap with the textual community surrounding *The Ladder*, and the two would not be mutually exclusive.

⁷ Barbara Stephens, 'Aldrich "Walks Alone"', in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 1.9, (June 1957), 16-18, p.16.

entire publicised feud participates in ‘the articulation of a lesbian politics of representation [which] emerged gradually over a roughly ten year period that coincided with the first decade of homophile activism and the so-called “Golden Age” of lesbian paperback originals.’⁸ As Meeker points out, *We Walk Alone*, as a partially biographical journalistic publication, was based on the experiences of Aldrich, who participated in the Manhattan lesbian bar culture. Aldrich, the self-identified ki-ki⁹ lesbian in her twenties, inhabited a world of drama and extremes: ‘bar raids, mafia-run bars, rampant prostitution, and drug use as well as thrilling parties, glamorous femmes, and handsome butch lesbians.’¹⁰ The DOB formed specifically to provide social interaction outside the dramatic and subversive space of lesbian bar culture. Thus, for the DOB and *The Ladder*, Aldrich’s exposé presented lesbian identities and experiences that were precisely what homophile organisations were trying to quell.

The feud between Ann Aldrich and *The Ladder* spanned 15 issues of the magazine (June 1957 - December 1963),¹¹ and one chapter in Aldrich’s anthology, *Carol in a Thousand Cities* (1960).¹² The reactions of *The Ladder*’s LTC were mostly negative,¹³ and varied in tone

⁸ Martin Meeker, ‘A Queer and Contested Medium: The Emergence of Representational Politics in “The Golden Age” of Lesbian Paperbacks, 1955-1963,’ *Journal of Women’s History*, 17.1 (Spring 2005), 165-188, p.166.

⁹ Within a butch-femme binary, a ki-ki lesbian was one who did not fall into either category.

¹⁰ Meeker, p.172.

¹¹ *The Ladder* 1.9; 2.4-5, 7-11; 3.4-5; 4.10-11; 5.1,7; 8.1, 3.

¹² Ann Aldrich, ‘*The Ladder* Rung by Rung,’ in *Carol in a Thousand Cities*, ed. Ann Aldrich, (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1960), 237-247.

¹³ B.G. ‘Ann Aldrich Does a Re-Take’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 2.4, (January 1958), 12. The article is signed ‘B.G.’ It is likely the article was written by Barbara Grier, due to her connection to the ‘Lesbiana’ column and the other literary content that appears in *The Ladder*. Grier’s 1987 interview for the Lesbian Herstory Archives corroborates this assumption. When asked about a different letter written in response to Florence Conrad’s questionnaires, Grier responds ‘Honey, if there’s a BG in there, it’s me.’; Del Martin, ‘Open Letter to Ann Aldrich,’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon 2.7, (April 1958), 4-6.

from initially diplomatic to vitriolic and visceral after Aldrich's 'damning' account of *The Ladder's* 1958 publication year.¹⁴ Moreover, the readers of *The Ladder* expressed their strong negative opinions. MB of Rochester, Texas (Marion Zimmer Bradley) shared her view that *We, Too, Must Love* was 'sensational rubbish' and that her work as Vin Packer was '90% Prurient peepshow pandering, and 10% prissy preaching.'¹⁵ Moreover, Zimmer Bradley lacks surprise in the knowledge that Ann Aldrich and Vin Packer are the same author, which indicates that Aldrich's work (at the time) perpetuated what some viewed as negative images of lesbians. Nevertheless, Zimmer Bradley's parenthetical note also indicated that Aldrich's publisher, Gold Medal, published books that tended toward sensationalism. Despite the dominant opinion that Aldrich's work was 'rubbish,' Aldrich was not without her supporters amongst the readers of *The Ladder*. For example, 'VN' of Kansas City, Kansas wrote: 'I cannot agree with Marion Zimmer Bradley's opinion of Ann Aldrich. Though I realize she is not too good, she is not trash as Miss Bradley claims. From the vantage point of years of careful reading of Lesbian fiction, I still insist that she is in the upper half of the middle third as far as quality goes.'¹⁶ Nevertheless, a majority of readers did not share VN's opinion. In one letter by 'ML' from Warwick, Rhode Island, the reader reveals that she and her partner felt Aldrich failed to include 'a couple in her books with whom [they] could compare [themselves].' According to the letter ML and her 'friend' represent a 'normal' and well-adjusted lesbian couple.¹⁷ Toward the end of the letter, ML wishes 'Miss Aldrich would write about someone like us.' Another

¹⁴ Jeanette H Foster, 'Ann of 10,000 Words Plus', in *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin, 4.11,(August 1960), 7-9,p.8.

¹⁵ 'Readers Respond', *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 2.5, (February 1958), 23-26, p.23.

¹⁶ 'Readers Respond' in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 2.8, (May 1958), 19-23, p.21.

¹⁷ 'My friend and I have lived together for less than five years, but as far as we are concerned it's for life. We own our furniture and car jointly, and just signed a mortgage for a home of our own. Well, it will be our own in no time' – 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 2.9, (July 1958), 21-26, p.22.

letter from 'FL' of Peace Dale, Rhode Island laments the production of works like those of Aldrich: 'How can we censure the otherwise-uninformed public for entertaining prejudice when their only acquaintance with the Lesbian is that learned through such writers as Ann Aldrich?'¹⁸ Moreover, FL labelled Aldrich as a 'traitor' to lesbians for perpetuating the popular belief that life as a homosexual was destined for misery.¹⁹ For those like FL, ML, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, the controversy over Aldrich's work was grounded in her representation of lesbians to the heterosexual public. Unlike the writers of *The Ladder*, readers were able to voice their opinions bluntly and unapologetically.

From the varied responses to Ann Aldrich's work, it is clear that on one level, *The Ladder* had a consensus about her work and its impact on lesbian representational politics. However, in many other ways, the members of *The Ladder's* textual community were more divided than the work of the editorial staff suggests. Letters like those from ML and JL provide evidence to suggest that there were certain behavioural expectations members of this textual community had for one another. In other words, the sudden change from diplomatic disagreement to visceral attacks on Aldrich and her work show that there were unwritten codes of literary etiquette within this textual community. While *The Ladder's* LTC seems to be interested in the edification of mainstream society on the subject of lesbian experience, there appears to be limitations on what that experience resembles. Any deviation from a lifestyle that would fit into mainstream society was vilified, and the notion appears clearly through this LTC's reaction to Aldrich's work.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.24.

¹⁹ FL states that her primary concern is for adolescent homosexuals. FL identified the potential 'unmeasured harm' Aldrich's 'misrepresentations' could do to young and impressionable lesbians. FL's letter participates in a larger discussion about the representational politics of 'Lesbiana.'

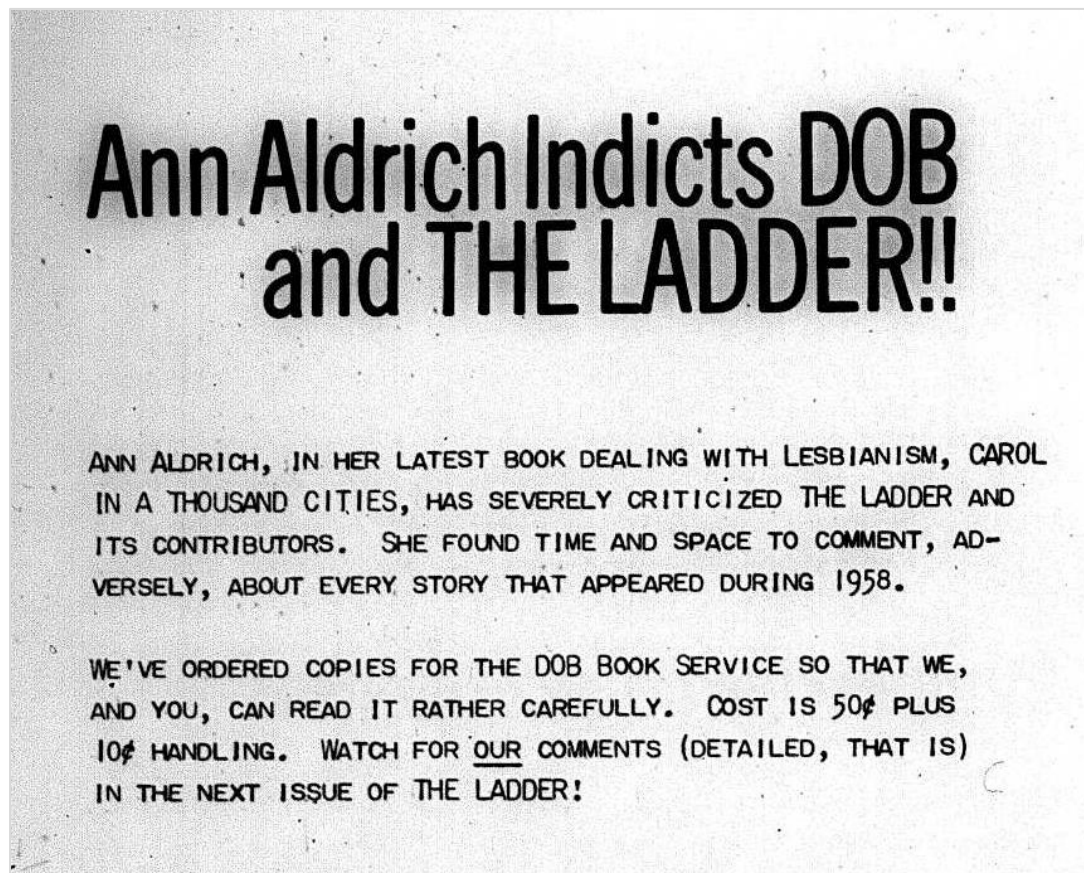


Figure 2.1 - *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin 4.10, (July 1960), p.26

Despite the controversy surrounding Vin Packer / Ann Aldrich's work, *The Ladder's* staff did not let this prevent them from disseminating Meaker's work. At the height of the controversy, *The Ladder* advertised *Carol in a Thousand Cities* and made it available through the DOB Book Service in the July and August 1960 issues (See Figure 2.1 and 2.2). The Ladder would further advertise novels *Spring Fire*, *The Evil Friendship*, and *We, Too Won't Last* through the book service. This suggests that even though the majority of *The Ladder's* LTC disagreed with Packer/Aldrich's portrayal of lesbians, the staff found it pertinent to make her work available to readers of *The Ladder*; doing so would provide readers with the opportunity

to make up their own minds about Packer/ Aldrich's work. Here is it important to note that the reception and reviews of Packer/Aldrich's work, however nuanced, failed to

Ann Aldrich Indicts DOB and THE LADDER!!

READ THE COMPLETE STORY

Which all began a long time ago with THE LADDER's "Open Letter to Ann Aldrich" published in April, 1958.

With the June, 1960 edition of CAROL IN A THOUSAND CITIES (Gold Medal Book, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.), Miss Aldrich has finally made her reply. She takes THE LADDER apart "rung by rung" or issue by issue during 1958.

The whole story is available through DOB Book Service:

CAROL IN A THOUSAND CITIES - 50 cents plus
10 cents handling

OPEN LETTER TO ANN ALDRICH (April, 1958
issue of THE LADDER) - 50 cents

Complete file of THE LADDER for 1958 - \$4

THE LADDER's reply to Miss Aldrich (August,
1960) - 50 cents

SEND YOUR ORDER NOW to

DOB Book Service
165 O'Farrell St., Rm. 405
San Francisco 2, California

Figure 2.2 - *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin, 4.11 (August 1960), p.21.

take into consideration the publishing practices of paperback distributors during the 1950s. The aforementioned letters from 'Readers Respond' often made value judgements on Packer's pulps, noting the negative portrayal of her lesbian characters, but did not concede that there were stringent publishing practices—especially in the early 1950s—that prevented positive portrayals of lesbians and their romances. Through an introduction to the 2004 republication of *Spring Fire*, Packer provides a detailed account of her experience publishing the first lesbian pulp fiction novel.

Over drinks in a hotel bar, the new editor of Gold Medal Books, Dick Carroll advised his secretary, Marijane Meaker (Vin Packer) that 'maybe there was a way' for her to tell her story.²⁰ If she was willing to meet certain requirements, she could fulfil her desire to write about her experience of being 'one of those': a lesbian.²¹ Meaker's account of *Spring Fire's* publication outlines the limitations in US society and the legal constraints facing authors (and publishers) in the 1950s. According to Carroll, Meaker would have to write a story about young women in college (university), instead of boarding school, as Meaker originally intended. Meaker could not 'make homosexuality attractive' and could not give the story a 'happy ending.'²² Packer (Meaker) recounts the discussion of her story with Dick Carroll as follows:

"But your main character can't decide she's not strong enough to live that life," Dick said. "She has to reject it knowing that it's wrong. You see, our books

²⁰ Vin Packer, *Spring Fire* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004), p.vi

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.v.

²² *Ibid.*, p.vi.

go through the mails. They have to pass inspection. If one book is considered censurable the whole shipment is sent back to the publisher. If your book appears to proselytize for homosexuality, all the books sent with it to distributors are returned. You have to understand that. I don't care about anybody's sexual preference. But I do care about making this new line [Gold Medal Books] successful."²³

Carroll's concerns were not exaggerations. After the moral outrage at the US publication of Tereska Torres's autobiographical *Women's Barracks* (1950), 'The US House of Representatives centred much of their 1952 committee on Current Pornographic Materials' on Torres' book and other paperback originals.²⁴ Their 'lurid covers' and 'objectionable content' placed pulps under heavy legal scrutiny in the early days of lesbian pulp fiction.²⁵ Ultimately, Carroll was focused on creating a sellable product; the sexual preference of the author aside, Carroll, as a the editor of Gold Medal, did not care if his secretary was gay, or that she wanted to write about her experience, his goal was purely business-driven capitalism. Because it was his job to create a successful line of paperback originals, he was willing to manoeuvre around censorship guidelines to obtain better book sales.

Meaker's boss was not just concerned with the written content. Like many pulp fiction authors, Meaker was not responsible for the cover, nor the title of her book. The title of *Spring Fire* was an attempt to confuse the consumer into picking up Meaker's book, thinking it was

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Melissa Sky, 'Cover Charge: Selling Sex and Survival in Lesbian Pulp Fiction,' in *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, ed. by Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), pp.129-145.

²⁵ Ibid.

the 'big seller,' *The Fires of Spring* by James Michener.²⁶ In the name of business, Carroll had Meaker's pulp wrapped 'in a sexy cover,'²⁷ (see Figure 2.3) picturing

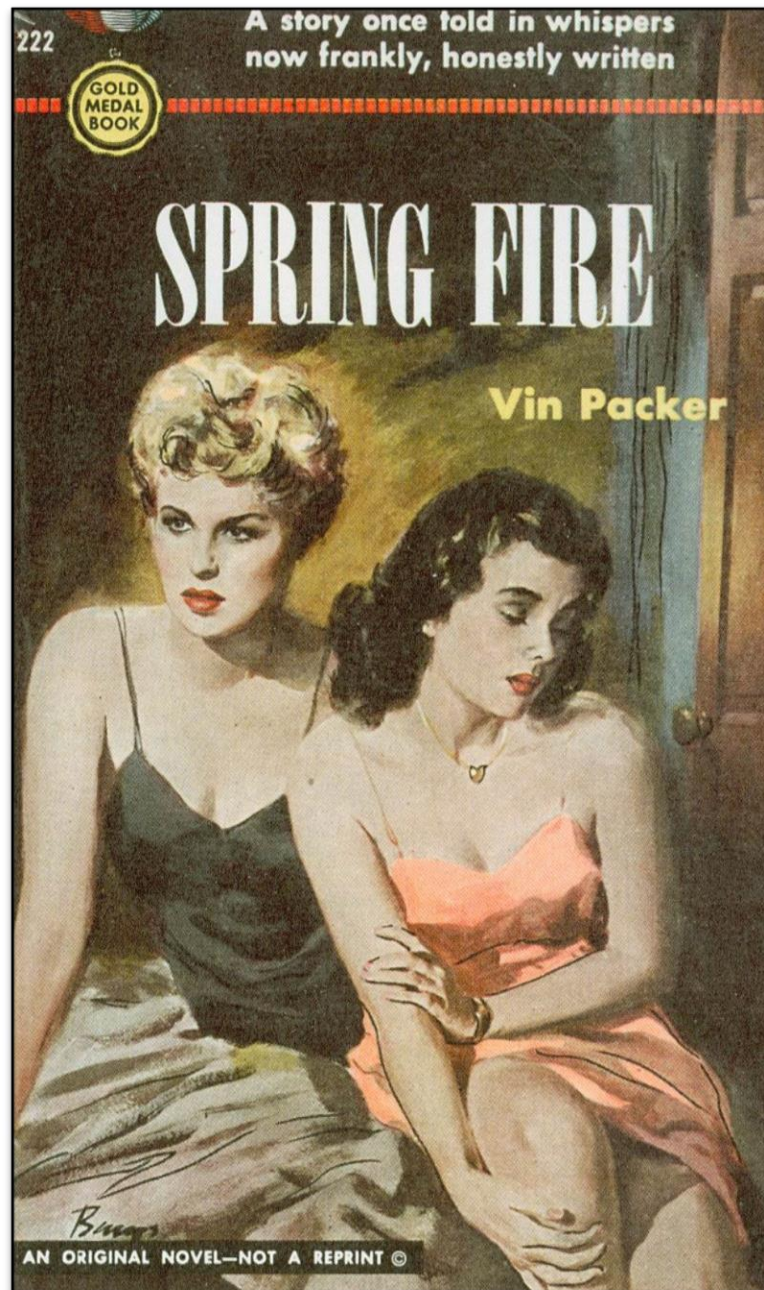


Figure 2.3: 1952 cover of *Spring Fire*. Taken from *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction 1949-1969*. Cover art by Barye Phillips.

²⁶ Packer, p.vii.

²⁷ Ibid.

‘two women who looked a lot like hookers, sitting in their slippers on a bed.’²⁸ Fawcett publications took a risk that would pay off, for *Spring Fire* ‘sold 1,463,917 copies in its first printing’ in 1952; this exceeded the sales of other popular crime novels *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (James Cain, 1934) and *My Cousin Rachel* (Daphne du Maurier, 1951).

Though attention has been paid to the sale of lesbian pulps in the 1950s and 1960s, and to their role as cultural artefacts,²⁹ the content of lesbian pulp fiction deserves further attention. While the context of *Spring Fire*’s publication allows for a better understanding of the evolution of lesbian fiction in the United States, the pulp’s written content also invites close reading. Through this chapter, I show how closely reading *Spring Fire* reveals subversive commentary on the sexual politics present in US sorority systems inherent in Packer’s pulp novel. Moreover, this subversive commentary can be applied to wider US sexual politics during the 1950s. While *The Ladder*’s LTC was highly critical of Packer/ Aldrich’s work, their criticisms invite a re-evaluation of the pulp novel they deemed ‘bad’ fiction.

2. Epsilon Epsilon Epsilon – The Sorority and Heterosexuality

Spring Fire is a story about two young women, a college freshman and a slightly older student who meet through the fictional Tri Epsilon sorority on the fictional campus of Cranston University. In using an all-female (or predominantly female) social setting, Packer set a standard for the pulps that would follow. In addition to college campuses, women’s

²⁸ Ibid., p.ix.

²⁹ Stephanie Foote, ‘Deviant Classics: Pulps and the Making of Lesbian Print Culture’, *Signs*, 31 (Autumn 2005), 169- 190

prisons, dormitories, and army corps were often the setting where lesbian desire was kindled within a text. According to Jaye Zimet, 'these books often told of the horrors awaiting the naïve and unsuspecting.'³⁰ This convention would be later used in Ann Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* (1957), which I examine in Chapter Three. Additionally, titles like *Women Without Men* (Reed Mar, 1957), *City of Women* (Nancy Morgan, 1952), and *Sorority House* (Jordan Park, 1956) (See figures 2.4-2.6) entail stories about women in prisons, in war time, and in sororities respectively. As Zimet points out, the covers read on their own hinted that 'when women are segregated from men, lesbianism is the result.'³¹ The convention-setting and craze-inspiring *Spring Fire* is considered more 'authentic' than pulps written by men: 'many later books were written by men [...] and were filled with stereotypical and misogynistic ideas about women and lesbians.'³² *Spring Fire*'s 'authenticity' comes not just from the fact that Packer identifies as a lesbian, but also through her experience joining a sorority in college.

Packer opens *Spring Fire* with protagonist Susan Mitchell journeying through Cranston University campus. *Greek Town*, the section of campus where the fraternities and sororities are housed, is described as picturesque:

[...]it was magic over there, close to the stadium, within walking distance of the campus, but not huddled up in narrow streets the way dorms and boarding houses were [...] with street after street of grand houses -- brick, stucco, stone, and fresh white wooden houses. Each one had a gold plaque with shining Greek letters, and nearly all of them had spacious yards, winding

³⁰ Jaye Zimet, *Strange Sisters*, (New York, NY: Viking Studio, 1999), p.27

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p.45.

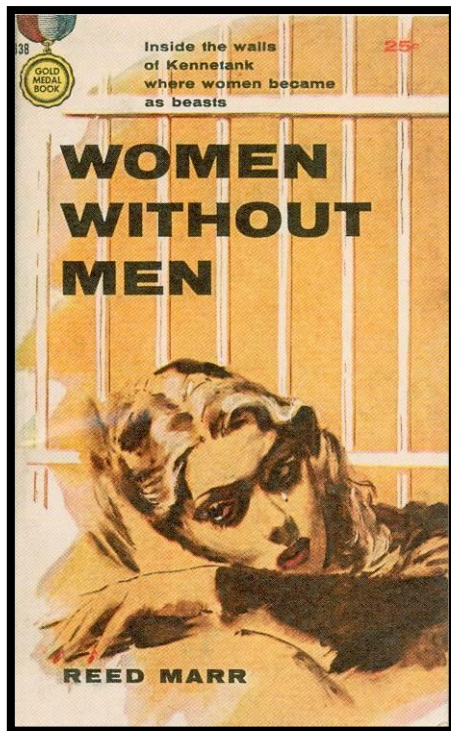


Figure 2.4: 1957 cover of *Women Without Men*. Taken from *Strange Sisters*. Cover art by Barye Phillips.

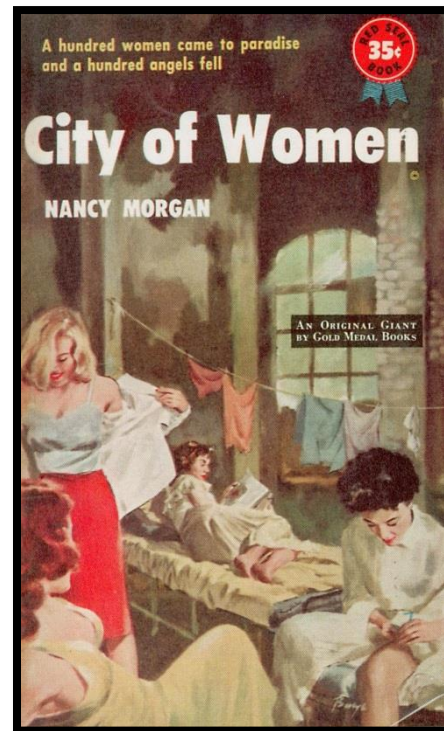


Figure 2.5: 1952 cover of *City of Women*. Taken from *Strange Sisters*. Cover art by Barye Phillips.

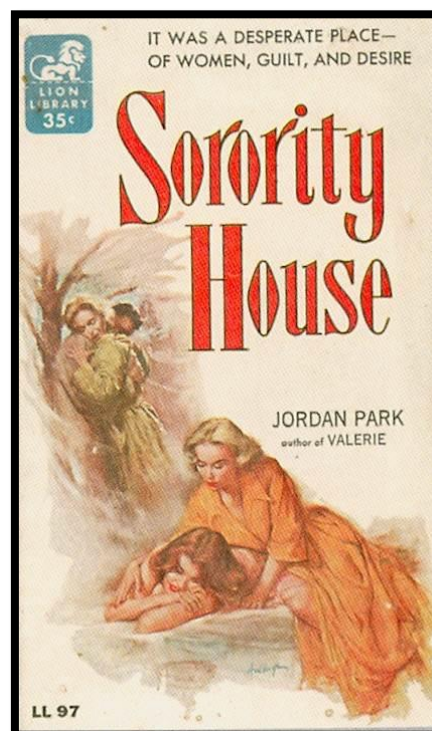


Figure 2.6: 1956 cover of *Sorority House*. Taken from *Strange Sisters*. Cover art by Clark Hulings

driveways, and huge white columns that stood impressively, symbols of magnificence.³³

The image of the college campus, namely the Greek housing, fits in with the American ideal of spacious homes; not crowded or cramped together. The large homes do not simply meet the ideals set by the 'American Dream', but also has the effect of isolating Greek Town and the College campus from the outside world. While Packer mentions places like Los Angeles and Kansas City, she never clearly pinpoints where Cranston University (CU) is meant to be. Thus, CU's Greek Town can represent any university campus. Packer may employ this strategy for a few reasons: one might be to protect her identity. In addition to using a pseudonym, using a fictionalised sorority and a fictionalised university would help to maintain the anonymity afforded by writing under a *nom de plume*. Alternatively, using fictionalised names would serve to protect the author and the publisher from legal action; to implicate a real university or sorority in a lesbian love story (however fictional) would be an unwise business practice, due to the level of social power held by university and sorority/fraternity alumnae. Lastly, creating a generic university and sorority might enable readers to better connect with characters in the story. Lesbian readers who participated in sororities or attended all-female boarding schools would be able to identify with the experiences of Susan Mitchell (Mitch), and her love interest, Leda Taylor. Whatever the reason, Packer's use of false names creates the setting for a generic university environment.

Despite the idyllic image of Greek Town, the main character, Susan Mitchell (or Mitch), is given a sense of foreboding as she tours the campus to register and participate during Greek

³³ Packer, p.2.

Town's 'rush week': 'Then she too had felt a shiver of fear.'³⁴ Though a passing thought, easily forgotten as she walks through the serene college campus, Mitch is about to be scrutinised by several sororities, as she attempts to fit in with the ideals of 1950s white, middle-class womanhood.

To better understand the fictional environment of the sororal atmosphere in *Spring Fire*, we must briefly consider the history and function of sororities in American Universities and (indirectly) their ties to the wider social atmosphere of American society. The study of sororities and fraternities in the United States and their gendered social prescriptions date back to 1937, however a majority of the sociological findings have been published within the last thirty to forty years.³⁵ While utilising the studies published after 1950 may seem anachronistic, sororities and fraternities function largely on traditional standards and practices. Thus, it is useful to utilise these sociological studies to better understand the norms and values that structured the sororities familiar to Packer and other writers from the same period. Lisa Handler provides a brief history of sororities in her essay:

First formed at the end of the 19th century, sororities did not burgeon until the 1920s. Their growth coincided with an influx of nonelite students and the consolidation of fraternities' political power on college campuses. By the 1930s, sororities provided women limited access to this power [...] and supervised housing [...], and they created mechanisms for safeguarding and guaranteeing an exclusive dating and mating pool [...] To some extent, this is still the case.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Willard Waller, "The Rating and Dating Complex" in *American Sociological Review*, 2.5, (October 1937), 727-734.

³⁶ Lisa Handler, 'In the Fraternal Sisterhood: Sororities as Gender Strategy', *Gender and Society* 9.2 (April 1995), 236-255, pp.236-237.

Heterosexual (and homogenous) courtship has historically been the focus of the American sorority. This practice can be examined in terms of gender performance³⁷ and the preservation of race/social class.³⁸ According to Handler, women's participation in a sorority is a gendered experience. The Sorority (as a whole) utilises femininity as a means of navigating the Greek system, and through the wider culture of the university campus.³⁹ Moreover, 'sororities are a strategy for dealing with the complexities of gender(ed) relations-both among women and between women and men.'⁴⁰

Though sororities rely on a rhetoric of sisterhood and solidarity, 'the sororal sisterhood is different from that invoked by the feminist language of sisterhood in that it is not rooted in an articulation of shared oppression based on gender.'⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, sororities have historically functioned on heterocentric goals, including the acquisition of boyfriends and potential husbands for their members. Hence, as Handler points out, the view of womanhood in the sororal community functions on 'a relational view of women: women need each other, particularly for support in dealing with gendered problems and gender relations.'⁴² However, this view is also based on gendered stereotypes believed by members of sororities: 'women cannot be trusted, particularly in dealing with gendered problems and gender relations.'⁴³ These stereotypes create a duplicitous and self-serving relationship between sorority sisters: the young women need each other to navigate their heterosexual

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John Finely Scott, "The American College Sorority: Its Role in Class and Ethnic Endogamy," *American Sociological Review*, 30.4 (1965). 514-27.

³⁹ Handler, p.237.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.,p.238.

⁴² Handler, p.238.

⁴³ Ibid.

existence, but they must also regard each other with a certain level of mistrust, leading to an uncertainty about the value of the support network that sisters have pledged to. The effect of sororal practices, as Handler argues, is that members of contemporary sororities may 'unwittingly reinforce and perpetrate gender inequality.'⁴⁴

According to John Finley Scott's sociological study (1965), the issue of marriage and finding a suitable husband are not only gendered goals, but goals motivated by the preservation or improvement of social class and, by extension, the preservation of racial purity. While Handler evinces that 'men are a focal point of sororal life,' Scott's findings suggest that the *type* of man a sorority sister associated with was additionally important to the collective reputation of the sorority and the reputation of the individual.⁴⁵ According to Scott,

Sororities are much more than a simple feminine counterpart to the more widespread college fraternity; less variable in their form, they differ from fraternities mainly because marriage is a profoundly more important determinant of social position for women than for men and because the norms associated with marriage correspondingly bear stronger sanctions for women than for men.⁴⁶

The sorority is a desired social setting for daughters because it gives parents a sense of security.⁴⁷ Additionally, as Barbara Risman argues, 'Girls join sororities to belong to a close-knit community in an otherwise overwhelming and alienating university,' according to Risman's research, girls were in search of a 'home away from home,' and 'instant friends of

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.236.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.244.

⁴⁶ Scott, p.514.

⁴⁷ Waller, p.730.; Gene A Levine and Leila A Sussman, 'Social Change and Sociability in Fraternity Pledging,' in *The American Journal of Sociology*, (January 1960), pp.391-399.

both sexes.’⁴⁸ Historically, a woman’s social status was ultimately dependent on their husband’s, and the sorority was a means for parents to ensure their daughter would marry the *right* man. By limiting sororal dating options to fraternity men, the sorority ensured that members associated with people of higher or equal social strata.⁴⁹ The observations made by Handler and Scott, in this case, serve to illuminate the social practices of sororities, enabling better interpretation of the social /group behaviour of the Tri Epsilon (and other sororities/fraternities) present in *Spring Fire*. Like the sororities described by Scott and Handler, Epsilon Epsilon Epsilon does not promise parents and their daughters an environment for scholastic achievement and intellectual growth. On the contrary, ‘the purpose of a sorority is to help a girl grow,’ presumably into heteropatriachal concepts of womanhood.⁵⁰ That is to say, the sorority functions as a dating pool and a production line for wives and mothers.

Early on in the story, the Tri Epsilon’s pledge director, Jane Bell, discusses what sort of man Tri Eps are expected to date:

[...] you have joined a sorority because you have found that you’re in with a gang that you can be mighty proud of. Most men join fraternities for the same reason. They want to pick a bunch that they know have high standards and high ideals. Now, to my way of thinking, it’s only logical to want to date that kind of guy.⁵¹

In this meeting, one of the pledges speaks up, noting that her boyfriend is unable to afford the cost of joining a fraternity. This cost makes the sorority/fraternity system exclusive to students from middle/upper class groups, and excludes children from lower, working-class

⁴⁸ Risman, p.235.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Packer, p. 6.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.24.

backgrounds. For example, Mitch's acceptance into Tri Epsilon is based on her father's wealth; Kitten Clark claims that if she wasn't Edward Mitchell's daughter, Mitch would 'get a nice, fat, round blackball from' her.⁵²

Eventually, Jane Bell is made to concede, 'You can go out with independents if you want -- on weekdays. Weekends, we'd prefer you to be with fraternity men.'⁵³ Despite already being in a relationship, pledges are expected to attend Sorority and Fraternity functions with a date. Jane Bell's demands on behalf of the sorority is in agreement with Handler's findings: 'the sorority gains prestige by having sisters invited to a fraternity formal[...] sisters willingly sacrifice their ideal romantic dates to participate in a social economy in which men, particularly fraternity men, are the valued currency.'⁵⁴ But while Handler suggests that the sacrifices are willingly made, Packer's story suggests that at least *some* of the sisters are not happy with the idea of going on dates with men who are not their boyfriend. Ultimately, the dating practices of the Tri Eps influence the reputation of the sorority. In making sisters date brothers, the sorority secures their reputation as an institution in which parents can be confident that their daughter will find 'the right husband.' Perhaps inadvertently, the sorority, as a non-academic entity in an academic constitution, places Packer's characters in an environment that is anti-feminist, and reinforces the message that a woman's education (and academic performance) does not matter, so long as she finds the right husband.

Sororities function as 'a strategy for dealing with heterosexual culture,' and rely on the heterosexist assumption that the sororal home promises a desexualised and wholesome environment for female students who have been separated from the safety and supervision

⁵² Ibid, p.11

⁵³ Ibid., p.25

⁵⁴ Handler, p.246

of their parents' home.⁵⁵ This assumption is challenged in *Spring Fire*, not only in terms of the homosexual romance between Leda and Mitch, but also in terms of the heterosexual interactions between Mitch and Bud, and Mitch and Charlie. Because the Tri Eps are expected to be on dates (limited by a strict curfew), the older sisters attempt to set Mitch up with various suitable partners. Throughout the story, then, the readers' understanding of heterosexual 'love' and courtship are governed primarily through Mitch's relationship with Bud. Readers are introduced to Bud, an older member of the Sigma Delta Fraternity, when he and Mitch go on a double date with Leda and her boyfriend (and Bud's Sigma Delta brother) Jake. Bud's role in the book is as a sexual aggressor. Left alone, Bud refers to Mitch as 'Jail Bait' when he discovers she is seventeen. Even though she is underage, Bud continues his sexual advances, giving her beer to get her drunk, and touching her despite her protests:⁵⁶

Fighting desperately with him, she could not stop his hands from pulling her skirt up[...] she kicked him and sent him back away from her. He stood up and glared down. "Mamma tell you not to?" he said angrily. "Mamma tell you sex is dirty?"⁵⁷

Bud's apparent outrage at Mitch's sexual inexperience highlights a disconnect between prohibitive social rhetoric on premarital sex in the post-war period and the sexual action taken by men and women outside the marital bed. According to Wini Breines, 1950s fiction often depicted hidden sexual activity: 'This discrepancy confirms the oft-noted divergence between conservative sexual values and more liberal sexual behaviour, a discrepancy that was especially sharp in this period.'⁵⁸ Sexual interaction between men and women occurred on

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.238.

⁵⁶ Packer, pp.19-21

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.21.

⁵⁸ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*, (Boston: Beacon, 1992), p.90.

two levels – the chaste public representation and the obscured sexual participation. Because women were viewed as sexually passive – and men sexually active—given 1940s/50s social conditions, perhaps Bud has read too far into Mitch’s willingness to go on a date; he may have interpreted that by remaining in a secluded spot, Mitch is giving him permission to have sex with her. When Leda and Jake return, Bud instantly reverts to a detached behaviour: ‘sullen silence.’⁵⁹ If alone, Bud acts entitled to Mitch’s body, but appears uninterested by her in the presence of others. Bud may not care what Mitch really wants out of their date. He may believe that he can take any action he wants because Mitch would jeopardise her reputation, if she told anyone. Though we are not privy to Bud’s internal thought processes, what we do know is that his behaviour is condoned under heteropatriarchal social conditions. So long as Bud keeps his hands off Mitch in a public setting, he feels he can take liberties with Mitch in private.

Bud’s aggressiveness only increases each time Mitch interacts with him. The next time Mitch is subject to Bud’s aggressive, alpha male behaviour is when she is on a date with a younger Sigma Delta brother at the fraternity house. Mitch is made to go to the ladies room alone, and is faced with the temptation of lifting a fig leaf off the groin of a cardboard cut-out of a naked man. The leaf, rigged to an alarm, announces when Mitch’s curiosity gets the better of her.⁶⁰ Embarrassed and feeling cornered by the jeering crowd, Mitch hides until Bud drunkenly tells them to disperse and attempts to coax her out of hiding. When he fails, Bud resorts to shouting: ‘By God, you’ll come out! [...] Damn you [...] Damn you and your damn innocence! You wanted to look, didn’t you? By God, look, then!’⁶¹ In fear, anger, and anxiety,

⁵⁹ Packer, p.22

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.30-31

⁶¹ Ibid., p.32.

she rushes out and smashes a china vase over Bud's head before running out into the night. This event causes a scandal amongst the fraternities. From the perspective of the other characters, Mitch overreacted. The effect of this incident in the narrative has the effect of 'othering' Mitch and painting her as deviant in comparison to her more 'lady-like' sorority sisters. The communal reaction to the scandal also helps to establish the emphasis the Greek system (and 1950s society) places on the appearance and reputation of an individual. A young woman may behave lasciviously, so long as she is not public about it. Even though Mitch is naïve, a virgin, and therefore 'innocent,' she is guilty of trying to protect what society says makes her a *good* girl. Moreover, because she seeks the aid of a rival sorority, Delta Rho, she has made the incident public knowledge and shattered the feminine image and privacy of the Tri Epsilon sorority.

Bud agrees to forget the incident, if Mitch asks him to be her date at the Tri Ep's housewarming. Mitch agrees to the terms with pressure from her sorority sisters; doing this will save them from being 'blacklisted' and ostracized from the other Fraternities. When Bud and Mitch are left alone at the house warming, Bud supplies her with alcohol. In the cellar (made off-limits at the party) Bud rapes Mitch, telling her 'Shut up' when she protests: 'You wanted this. You wanted to know, Miss Virgin.'⁶² Afterwards, Bud advises her, 'take a hot bath and keep your mouth shut.'⁶³ In telling Mitch to 'take a hot bath,' Bud participates in the popular 1950s mentality that sex and genital cleanliness were closely tied;⁶⁴ as if taking a hot bath would wash away the psychological damage of rape – or sex in general. Bud's instructions echo the postwar view that sex (especially outside marriage) was *dirty* and

⁶² Ibid., p.54.

⁶³ Ibid., p.55.

⁶⁴ Breines, p.104.

unclean. Moreover, Bud has taken liberties with Mitch's body. Like on their first date, Bud's rape is an extreme case of male perceived accessibility to the female body. Though we know nothing of Bud's upbringing, he becomes a stand-in for the archetypal (white) American male. In public, he is a gentleman; presenting Mitch with an orchid and pinning it to her blouse.⁶⁵ In private, he acts as though he is owed Mitch's sexual submission.

What is notable about Bud's sexual violence is the way in which Packer juxtaposes the rape scene with images of a 'pinning' ceremony at the housewarming. Bud makes a first attempt, prior to taking Mitch down into the cellar. He suggests that they sit in her car because 'the porch is jammed' and attempts to kiss and touch Mitch, despite her protests.⁶⁶ Mitch is momentarily saved by the sudden arrival of Marsha and Ken, who suggest they all return to the house together because 'Jim Keeler is going to pin Kitten.'⁶⁷ Scott provides a detailed description of the significance of 'pinning' in the Greek system:

[...] a pre-engagement relationship signifying reciprocal commitment and sexual prerogative – is solemnized by an elaborate ritual, often involving the participation of many students, witnessed by all the sorority sisters and attended, in its classic form by a choir of fraternity men singing outside the sorority. This serves to reinforce progress toward engagement at its weakest point and to hinder withdrawal from the 'pinned' commitment. The special status of the pinned and engaged is ceremonially reinforced in other ways too: where sorority functions are recorded in college newspapers, much attention is given to pinnings and engagements.⁶⁸

Much of Scott's description of the pinning ceremony is present in Packer's fictional portrayal:

⁶⁵ Packer, pp.50-51.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.52.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.53.

⁶⁸ Scott, p.527.

A huge circle formed in the dining room and Jim Keeler stood in the center, his arm around Kitten's waist. From the sidelines, Mother Nussy beamed as the girls sang the "Sweetheart Song." When it was finished, the orchestra played "I Love You Truly," and Jim pinned his large fraternity pin on Kitten's bosom. Then they danced and the others joined in.⁶⁹

Like Scott's description, Jim and Kitten's pinning is witnessed by all of the sorority and sanctioned by the presence of Mother Nussy. Though carried out by Kitten's sisters and not a fraternity choir, a lover's song is sung to the couple. The entire affair is a grand gesture of matrimonial intent. Kitten's pin, much like an engagement ring, marks her as Jim's and removes her from the dating pool. Though we are to assume that Jim will also refrain from dating others, nothing marks him as Kitten's; this is in alignment with concepts of male dominance over women, and the historical treatment of women as property. In the context of *Spring Fire*, the pinning becomes a mockery of courtship, because it is described along-side Bud's sexual assault on Mitch. The delicate orchid Bud pins to Mitch eventually ends up 'squashed beside the couch'⁷⁰ in the basement after Bud rapes her. In pinning an orchid to Mitch, Bud parrots the pinning ceremony between Jim and Kitten, which in itself is a mockery of courtship. Bud temporarily claims Mitch with the orchid (for the evening), and the orchid is later damaged by sexual violence. Both acts of 'pinning' a woman become a mechanism for asserting male (heterosexual) dominance over women.

Though Mitch may seem to *go along* and consent to Bud's presence, it must be remembered that she was made to be Bud's date and given no choice but to be in his company for the duration of the evening. To leave Bud would mean social ridicule and rejection from

⁶⁹ Packer, p.53.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.54.

her sorority sisters. Placed in a compromising situation, intoxicated with alcohol, Mitch can only plead with Bud to stop. Ultimately, the message that comes through Packer's representation of sororal/fraternal courtship is that every action taken is taken in the guise of civility. While I cannot claim that each of Packer's Fraternity men behave like Bud Roberts, his presence and actions reveal the hypocrisy of the Greek system, and by extension, heterosexual courtship in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Again, the reality of the situation is obscured by the social importance of appearance and reputation. When Leda finds her, and discovers what happened, she tells Mitch, 'Don't trust anyone. Don't tell anyone what happened in the cellar. The basement was off limits, and you've been drinking. God, it isn't your fault! God knows that. But honey -- no one cares when a rule is broken. They don't care.'⁷¹ Both her friend/lover (Leda) and rapist (Bud) assert that silence and secrecy is the only way to handle the topic of sex, even when the sexual act is an act of violence. Thus, the wholesome image of the Greek system is undermined; sororal promises of preserving the virginity of, and providing husbands for, sorority sisters are broken in secret. Below the surface of propriety, the Greek system in Packer's novel is populated by jaded male characters who act upon their predatory sexual desires with the female characters.

Not every male character behaves as Bud does. Charlie, an independent, serves as a comparison to Bud's aggressive and predatory behaviour towards Mitch. Encouraged to date men in addition to her love affair with Leda, Mitch sets up a date with Charlie, reminiscent of her first date with Bud. In the same location, Charlie brings alcoholic drinks for them to share. Charlie confesses he has not been to the spot before, and Mitch, haunted by the memory of

⁷¹ Ibid., p.56.

Bud's advances, denies visiting that very location outside town.⁷² As Mitch remembers Leda's warning -- 'I couldn't love you if you were a lesbian'⁷³—Charlie admits that he loves Mitch and physically expresses his desire to have sex with her by holding her hand:

Mitch was afraid because it still was not the way it was with Leda. It was empty and aimless. [Charlie] was sweet and shy and he loved her. If it was not now, then when? When ever? She reached out and touched his ears and his neck and there was no hair there. "Do you want to?" she said. "Do you really want to?"⁷⁴

Through this passage, Packer sets Charlie up as a stand-in for Leda. Despite the trauma of Bud's rape, Mitch attempts to have sex with Charlie by setting up a similar scenario to her first date with Bud. Thus, the dating scenario becomes formulaic for Mitch. In a gendered way, Mitch expects that Charlie will take up the role of the sexual aggressor, but Charlie does not meet that standard. Moreover, Mitch thinks of Leda as Charlie kisses her, hoping for Charlie to 'hurry' not only because it's cold out, but perhaps because she'd like to get the sexual experience over and done with. This highlights the gender roles young men and women were expected to perform during a date. Even though Mitch doesn't truly feel it, she tells Charlie she returns his love, thus proving that she is only playing to the expected role of a young woman on a date.

When Charlie changes his mind about having sex with Mitch, it eventually sparks paranoia in Mitch about what she did wrong: Mitch asks, 'Was it me?' Charlie responds: 'I don't want to talk about it! I don't ever want to talk about it!'⁷⁵ When Charlie changes his mind about engaging in sexual intercourse, Mitch simply leaves him alone to pack up their

⁷² Ibid., p.90.

⁷³ Ibid., p.80

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.91.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.92.

blanket and drinks before driving him home. After their date, Packer reveals that Charlie is a religious young man: 'Remembering Susan Mitchell, he blamed her.' In his notebook he writes,

I was wrong about Susan. I admit that it was my fault too, but it was her idea to get the liquor and go out there with the blankets. She did not try to stop me. I had too much to drink and I never ached that way before. I thank God in heaven that I was stopped -- That God knew best for me, and then He gave me my warning. I shall never lose his faith in me again.⁷⁶

Through the heterosexual interactions between Mitch and Charlie, Packer gives Mitch the opportunity to attempt a non-aggressive relationship with a man. However, Mitch's desire to sleep with Charlie is a product of her desire to please Leda. Desperate to prove to her roommate that she isn't a lesbian, Mitch feels she is expected to have sex with Charlie. From Charlie's perspective, Mitch is a temptress, whom he later blames her for his transgression against God. Charlie's relationship with God is the only religious reference in the story. Before writing in his journal, he attempts to read Psalms 51. Reading the Bible appears to be a means for him to absolve *himself* of sin. Charlie's religious beliefs are thus painted in a self-serving light.

Though Mitch may be more insistent in having sex than Charlie, it is ultimately Charlie who decides if they have sex. On both of Mitch's dates, it is her male partner who decides whether or not sex is involved. Additionally, Mitch is initially sexually submissive with Leda, who is the one who initiates their sexual relationship. I will discuss the dynamics of Mitch's relationship with Leda in the following chapter, but for now, what is important to consider is Mitch's overall sexual submissiveness. Any sexual act Mitch takes is dictated by the desires of

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp.97-98.

others: Bud rapes Mitch, Leda initiates sexual contact with Mitch, Mitch attempts to have sex with Charlie, and finally, Charlie terminates their sexual activity. Even in the end, when the Dean of Women investigates the relationship between Leda and Mitch, she asserts that ‘Susan Mitchell would be a perfectly normal girl if it hadn’t been for Leda.’⁷⁷ Thus, Packer writes Mitch’s character as a submissive naïve young woman with little, or no, agency in her (hetero)sexual experience or sexuality.

Packer gives the reader little follow-up on the relationship between Charlie and Mitch. The last time Packer mentions Charlie is in the context of Mitch’s paranoia about her sexuality. In staring at Mitch in their French class, Charlie inspires Mitch’s fear of being discovered a lesbian:

Why couldn’t he do it? What was it she had read? Exactly? “A strong congenital trend...risk to associate with a girl who has these traits...” What? Did he know about her? He had brought that thing [a condom] in his wallet and he had wanted to. Was there something on her body that showed it? She squirmed uncomfortably in her seat, and listened to the slow, calculated conjugation of the verb *avoir*.⁷⁸

Because Mitch’s conflict with Charlie is unresolved, and she ends up dating a different young man (Lucifer, another independent), we can assume that Charlie’s function in the novel is limited. Juxtaposed with Bud’s sexual aggression, Charlie represents the opposite end of a behavioural spectrum of male suitors. However, through Mitch’s relationship with both Charlie and Bud, we can see that Packer’s story displays conflicting messages delivered to young women about female (hetero)sexuality in the 1940s and early 1950s. Additionally,

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp.146

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp. 102-103.

societal pressures placed on women to perform specific gender roles, though not unique to postwar America, are institutionalised within the sorority system. This institutionalisation of gendered behaviour within the sororal/fraternal dating environment ultimately marginalises female sexual desire as being secondary to male desire.

Moreover, Packer's novel not only reveals that women are held to contradictory behavioural standards, but also unachievable beauty standards. As I will discuss in the next section, *Spring Fire* exemplifies the way in which American society in the 1950s held women to unattainable beauty standards, defining women by their physical appearance. Packer then undermines those gender assumptions by inverting the stereotype of the masculine lesbian.

3. 1950s Femininity and the Lesbian Body

According to analysis by Wini Breines and Julian B Carter, normalised female sexuality in the United States in the twentieth century was gendered, racialised, and politicised. In 1945, 'Norma' a statue representing the statistical 'average American girl' was put on display at the Cleveland Health Museum. In Carter's words, 'Norma was an emblem of the national body, modern era, sexed female.'⁷⁹ Along with her male counter-part, Normman, they represented the current (1940s) generation of 18-20 year old white Americans. Though they were presented as what *was* and not the ideal, they came to represent 'an ideal of specifically heterosexual whiteness, not simply a statistical composite of the American people.'⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Julian B Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940*, (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.2

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Through a recently sanctioned discourse of normal sexuality (human reproduction), concepts of *the normal* focused on ‘marriage, love, and babies.’⁸¹ Thus heterosexuality, as a condition of ‘whiteness,’ became inextricably tied in the rhetoric surrounding American normality. Normman and Norma functioned as an American ‘Adam and Eve’ in the politicisation of sexuality and whiteness. The physical representation of Norma cements her visually within American sexual discourse. Moreover, as Nell Irvin Painter argues,

Autobiographical statements of Americans born in the 1940s reveal a keen awareness of the difference between *American* standards of beauty and the bodies of women increasingly being called “ethnic.” This term dated back to the 1920’s, but it came into common discourse only after the Second World War as a way to label the children and grandchildren of Louis Adamic’s second immigrant generation. English, German, Scandinavian, and Irish Americans did not fall under the “ethnic” rubric, which had become a new marker for the former ‘alien races.’ [...] Much nose bobbing, hair straightening, and bleaching ensued. Anglo-Saxon ideals fell particularly hard on women and girls, for the strength and assertion of working-class women of the immigrant generations were out of place in middle-class femininity. Not only was the tall, slim, Anglo-Saxon body preeminent, the body must look middle- rather than working-class.⁸²

By the 1950s, according to Painter, Irish and Italian-Americans and their grandchildren were now included in the concepts of whiteness and, by extension, mainstream ideologies of American identity. With the growth of the American middle-class, and the suburbanisation of America, American identity became tied to middle-class whiteness.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp.9-11.

⁸² Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*, (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), p.364.

Through advertising campaigns, discourse on the female body would adopt the rhetoric of *the normal*, as represented by Norma, and become beauty standards. Advertisers, who were 'especially interested in teenage girls' in the 1950s, pedalled the unattainable female form to sell beauty products.⁸³ This female was white:

Being middle-class and white were indispensable building blocks, but a certain kind of body, complexion, hair, and face were required too. It was a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant version of beauty that millions of girls of immigrant background, to say nothing of women of colour, could never hope to emulate.⁸⁴

Like the Norma statue, in the 1950s 'to become American was to become white,' which as Breines's points out, suggests the presence of 'racial codes beneath the construction of gender.'⁸⁵ This codification of American femininity became linked with communist paranoia after World War II and the Second Red Scare. The rhetoric of Communist containment seeped into discourse of the American family, as the domestic sphere became the centre of the successes and ills of the American Dream.⁸⁶ Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942) held American women responsible for the troubles faced by American Society.⁸⁷ This text was republished multiple times in the United States, and in 1955, after twenty reprints, sold 180,000 hardback copies.⁸⁸ Many Historians of the 1950s point to Wylie's text as a seminal

⁸³ Breines, p.95.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.96.

⁸⁶ Miller and Novak; Whitfield; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic, 1988).

⁸⁷ Phillip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*, (New York: Farrar & Rinehard, inc., 1942).

⁸⁸ Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p.19

work that came to represent American attitudes towards women throughout the 1950s. According to Miller and Novak, Wylie, along with Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg ushered in an era of functionalist thinking: 'From such diverse sources as the public schools, newspaper advice columns, therapy sessions, popular magazines, and TV [Americans] learned the very different characters men and women were supposed to possess. People were only happy if they were functioning properly, if they obeyed their sexual roles.'⁸⁹ In *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947), Lundberg and Farnham participated in the popularised notion that women's happiness depended upon procreation and marriage, and by not doing so women were 'shirking their womanly responsibility.'⁹⁰ Within this heterocentric of linking a biological imperative with womanhood and femininity, a woman can only be fulfilled through marriage and having children.

With this historical context in mind, we can examine how *Spring Fire* discusses the female body and its ties to female sexuality. While Packer's story does not construct subversive messages regarding race, the homogenous population of the sorority and the fraternity in the novel is historically accurate.⁹¹ According to Kevin M Schultz, fraternity membership was historically exclusionary:

[Fraternities] remained modest in size and number through the early national and antebellum period, but then experienced tremendous growth during Reconstruction and the era of Jim Crow, when higher education was still a bastion of white Protestant men, but when that bastion first became

⁸⁹ Miller and Novak, p.151.

⁹⁰ Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1947), p.9.

⁹¹ Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft. *Jews at Williams : Inclusion, Exclusion, and Class at a New England Liberal Arts College*, (Williamstown: Williams College, 2013) pp.17-25, 139.

threatened by Catholics and Jews. Out of fear, most of the larger national fraternities began limiting their membership to those with “acceptable” characteristics. The most offensive language was probably that found in the charter of Phi Delta Theta, founded in 1912, which required that “only white persons of full Aryan blood, not less than sixteen years of age, should be eligible.” Most others restricted membership to “Christian Caucasians,” banning “the black, Malay, Mongolian or Semitic races.” [...] As late as the 1930s, then, social fraternities were considered a preserve for the ethnically, racially, and religiously elite; they were Anglo-American preserves.⁹²

In the post-war period, ex-servicemen did challenge the racial exclusivity of fraternities. However, formal protests and petitions were often rejected by the national governing bodies of individual fraternities.⁹³ In creating an exclusively white environment, the novel is party to the underrepresentation of people of colour in post-war popular fiction, but allows for an interrogation of 1940s and 1950s concepts of normative *whiteness* as tied to heterosexuality; more specifically about what it means to be a white (heterosexual) female in postwar America.

Before I discuss the connections drawn between physical appearance and female sexuality in the 1950s, we must decide on how to read Mitch. Leda, in the end of the novel, is outed as lesbian: she eventually has a break down and verbalises her love for Mitch in a daze brought on by a car accident.⁹⁴ Mitch, alternatively, is left with an ambiguous sexual identity. While the Dean of Women claims that Mitch’s sexual behaviour is a result of Leda’s manipulation, and Mitch is being psychologically treated by Dr Peters, evidence surrounding

⁹² Kevin M Schultz, ‘The Irony of the Postwar Religious Revival.’ *Liberty and Justice for All?: Rethinking Politics in Cold War America*, edited by Kathleen G. Donohue, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011). p.

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⁹³ Ibid, p.219

⁹⁴ Packer, pp.134-139.

Spring Fire's publication leads to a reading of Mitch as a lesbian character. In her 2004 Foreword, Packer writes that while the unhappy ending 'may have satisfied the post office inspectors, the homosexual audience would not have believed that [Mitch never loved Leda] for a minute.'⁹⁵ Moreover, in a 2003 NPR radio interview, Meaker (Packer) said 'I laughed' when she wrote the ending.⁹⁶ The ending was not something Packer would have ideally wanted, but she was willing to give her story a socially sanctioned ending to get her first book published.

In addition to the author's intentions for Mitch, we must also take into consideration what the 1950s audience would have taken away from *Spring Fire*. While heterosexual readers would have 'bought' the heterosexist ending, homosexual readers would not. According to Sherrie Inness in *The Lesbian Menace* (1997), gay and lesbian readers,

Look for meanings that lurk behind the text's apparently heterosexual surface, knowing that lesbian experiences, whether in fiction or reality, are rarely overt. When lesbians read, they actively disassemble the dominant heterosexual plot, demonstrating that heterosexuality does not hold its culturally prescribed central role for all readers.⁹⁷

While Inness makes this argument for lesbian readings of heterosexual plots, it is possible to apply this reading strategy to the lesbian readers of a lesbian romance novel. In other words, there is the potential for lesbian subtexts to be present in lesbian pulp novels published under heterosexist societal pressures. The overt heteronormative message in Packer's ending allows

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.viii.

⁹⁶ Marijane Meaker, interviewed by Terri Gross, *Fresh Air: Writer Marijane Meaker*, June 18, 2003, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1303128>>, accessed: 12 August, 2013.

⁹⁷ Sherrie A Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p.83.

for a deconstruction of what happens to Mitch. Hence, we can reasonably infer that lesbian readership in the 1950s would have read Mitch as a lesbian character, who will be given psychological treatment in an effort to ‘cure’ her of homosexual desire. Though Mitch must forsake lesbian sexuality for the sale of the book, I argue that Packer’s characterisation of Mitch (and Leda) employs physical appearance functions as a means of critiquing lesbian stereotypes and notions of femininity.

Throughout *Spring Fire*, the physical appearance of women is often scrutinised, much like the way Norma was evaluated by the media in 1945 and women evaluated themselves against advertisements in the 1950s.⁹⁸ Mitch’s appearance, instead of her personality, differentiates her from her sorority sisters. As they discuss which pledges are pre-approved, ‘the members of Tri Epsilon polished their nails, knitted, rubbed cold cream into their skin, and rolled their hair up on rags and iron curlers and bobby pins.’⁹⁹ The women of Tri Epsilon, in other words, are introduced to readers as young women who spend much of their time on their physical appearance. Information has been gathered on Susan Mitchell by an alumna before she arrives at the Tri Ep house:

[...] intimate details as the estimated income of the candidate’s father; the color of the guest towels in the candidate's bathroom and the condition of said bathroom; the morals of the candidate, the candidate’s mother, father, brother,

⁹⁸ In *Young White and Miserable*, Breines makes the historical point that in the 1950s, ‘Advertising, movies, movie and teen magazines, and music exerted a powerful impact on teenage girls’ (p.95) and ‘In General the postwar media worked to glorify women’s place in the home, as wives and mothers, and to exaggerate femaleness, especially female bodies [...]’ (p.99). While media still has a strong influence on female identity formation to this day, Breines’ point implies that the 1950s was a time where media began to have a strong influence on American identity formation.

⁹⁹ Packer, p.3.

and sister; and ever important, the social prestige of the candidate's family in the community.¹⁰⁰

The report reads that Susan Mitchell is 'an absolute *must*', because of her father's wealth and 'social prestige'. The report states that Mitch 'is not beautiful, but she is wholesome and a fine athlete' in addition to commenting on her 'fabulous' fashion sense.

Because Mitch is reported to be unattractive, Kitten Clark, the social chairman-- 'responsible for seeing that Tri Eps dated fraternity men' -- exclaims 'so far on our list we have four goon girls. Legacies. We have to take legacies, but we don't have to take Susan Mitchell!' ¹⁰¹ For Kitten and the sorority's troubles, Mother Nussy promises a reward: 'Remember that new set of silverware you all want for the house? The one with the Tri Epsilon crest on it? Well, girls, if we pledge this little girl, I think the [Kansas City] Alums will see to it that you get that silverware. In fact, girls, [...] I'll personally guarantee it.'¹⁰² Thus, for the promise of silverware and use of a red convertible, Leda, Kitten and the others pay special attention to Mitch, making her feel welcome and desired by the Tri Eps. Never left to herself, Mitch dances with several girls and is given a false, shallow sense of her place in the sorority:

During the summer the college catalogues and booklets had come through the mail, and she had flicked through the pages, seeing the pictures of debonair, glamorous young people her own age. But not like her. Mitch knew that then -- and again when Kitten talked to her and Marsha walked with her, and Marybell Van Casey sat beside her and smoked long cigarettes and talked about tennis and swimming and things Mitch understood. Still different, all of them. Mitch was

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.5

¹⁰² Ibid., p.6

aware of the fact, but she no longer pondered the differences. They liked her anyway. They wanted her to join Epsilon Epsilon Epsilon.¹⁰³

Mitch and the Tri Eps recognise a difference in her from the other young women, and this difference is emphasised by Mitch's physical appearance. Tall and athletic, Mitch does not feel she fits in with the Tri Eps' image. However, because they pay close attention to her, Mitch is lead to believe that these differences don't matter. Mitch, unlike the Tri Eps, senses an innate difference in herself, but she is unable to pin-point what that difference is.

Packer devotes the first paragraph of *Spring Fire* to the introduction and physical description of Mitch. Mitch's 'large body'¹⁰⁴ is the central focus:

She was not lovely and dainty and pretty but there was comeliness about her that suggested some inbred strength and grace. It was in her face. It was in the color of her eyes -- deep like the ocean way out there, but quiet and still. It was in the structure of her cheekbones, high and firm coming down to pull her chin up. She walked that way, too. She walked easy and sure.¹⁰⁵

Here, in Mitch's physical appearance we get a sense that Mitch does not fit within the ideal of beauty for 1950s American women. Mitch's large but comely (wholesome) appearance reflects her naivety. When she interacts with the young women from Tri Epsilon, she has a 'subconscious worry that she might be too uncut and plain for sorority sophisticates.'¹⁰⁶

Whenever Mitch is described, attention to her physical size is drawn. For example, she sees herself as a 'malformed giant,' and one of Bud's Sigma Delta brothers asks 'I don't know

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.9

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.1.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.9.

why you wanted to bother with the girl anyway. She's built like a barn.'¹⁰⁷ Mitch's appearance is also described in terms of a perceived masculinity to her features after she goes swimming:

In the mirror, the wetness of her hair gave it a bobbed look, and the reflection was like that of a young boy. Mitch moved her hands up and pushed her hair back from her ears and studied the effect. Her face looked fresh from the swim, her eyes bright, the straight hair darker, and slicked back mannishly.¹⁰⁸

Stripped of the trappings of femininity – curled hair, lipstick, and fashionable dress – Mitch is described as masculine in appearance, yet the masculinity is only partial. In other words, when Packer writes about the masculine qualities to Mitch's appearance, they are coded in masculine terms, but they do not mark Mitch as having an entirely male body. Because she is described as 'a young boy' and as 'mannish'—instead of looking *like a man* or *manly* – Mitch's physical attributes are thus androgynous and not completely masculine.

Mitch's subtly masculine appearance is reminiscent of the masculine appearance of Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Like lesbian pulp classics, Hall's novel about the androgynous Stephen Gordon and her tragic life story became a well-read text in the lesbian community. According to Inness, 'From 1928 through the 1960s, *The Well* was the most frequently sought out by the lesbian wanting to know more about her sexual orientation.'¹⁰⁹ Like Mitch, Stephen is classed as different from other female children, even from childhood. For example, Hall writes that there is an 'indefinable quality in Stephen that made her look wrong in the clothes she was wearing' and that Stephen's father is aware

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.58.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.101.

¹⁰⁹ Inness, p.14.

of something that makes her 'not as other children.'¹¹⁰ As a young woman, Stephen's body, like Mitch's, is described as being androgynous, but is coded in a language usually reserved for describing male bodies:

Stephen's figure was handsome in a flat, broad shouldered and slim flanked fashion; and her movements were purposeful, having fine poise, she moved with the easy assurance of the athlete. Her hands, although large for a woman, were slender and meticulously tended [...] the extraordinary likeness between father and daughter [...] resolute jaw.¹¹¹

Again, there is a similar language used even in describing the carriage of Stephen and Mitch. Mitch walks 'easy and sure' and Stephen moves 'with the easy assurance of the athlete.'¹¹² Even the names of Stephen and Mitch are masculine. Not surprisingly, Packer had read *The Well of Loneliness* before writing her novel.¹¹³ The influence of the masculine language coded on to Stephen's appearance, shows in Packer's description of Mitch. However, unlike Stephen, Mitch does not adopt male clothing, and a heterosexual identity is forced upon her by medical professionals. Though Mitch dresses like a woman, the emphasis placed on the inherent 'difference' about her throughout Packer's novel allows for the connection to be made between the two characters.

The masculinisation of lesbians in literature can be attributed to the medicalisation of homosexuality at the end of the 19th century. According to Sherrie Inness, in the 1880s and 1890s, sexologists Havelock Ellis and Richard von Kraft-Ebbing 'described lesbians who could be easily distinguished from heterosexual women because of their masculine carriage, dress,

¹¹⁰ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. 21, p.53

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.75.

¹¹² Packer, p.1.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. vii.

and actions.’¹¹⁴ Though the medical nature of Kraft-Ebbing and Ellis’ respective works did not reach a wider audience until the 1920s and 1930s, their definition of the lesbian as an ‘invert’ has clear influence on Hall’s portrayal of Stephen. In *The Lesbian Menace*, Inness examines the difference between the portrayals of the masculine lesbian in *The Well of Loneliness* and the feminine lesbian in *The Captive*, a French play by Edouard Bourdet that premiered in the US two years before the publication of Hall’s novel.¹¹⁵ Inness draws a comparison between the two contemporary works. Inness argues:

[...] far from being radical, Stephen Gordon represented an almost comfortingly conventional lesbian image. In actuality, for the heterosexual audience of the 1920s, the feminine portrayal of the lesbian in *The Captive* was far more disturbing than the mannish Stephen Gordon from *The Well*.¹¹⁶

In other words, the lesbian (like Stephen) who dresses like a man is less frightening to a heterosexist audience, because she is identifiable. The character of Madame d’Aiguines (who never appears on stage and is only spoken of) in *The Captive*, is upsetting to heteropatriachal sensibilities because she is socially invisible; in Inness’s words, ‘Her power lies in her resistance to classification.’¹¹⁷ I will revisit Inness’ arguments in the following section, but what I want to establish here is the connection between Mitch and Stephen as androgynous/masculine lesbians, and Leda and Madame d’Aiguines as the invisible, feminine lesbian. As I have established the similarities between Stephen and Mitch, I will establish the connections between Leda and Madame d’Aiguines.

¹¹⁴ Inness, p.16.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.14.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.25.

Leda, from the very beginning of the novel is described as fitting into the ideal of 1950s womanhood. Shortly after the androgynous description of Mitch, Packer describes Leda: ‘She had long black hair that shone like new coal, round green eyes, a stubborn tilt to her chin, proud pear-shaped breasts that pointed through her size 36 sweater, and long, graceful legs.’¹¹⁸ Moreover, Packer establishes Leda’s attractiveness when Mitch sees her for the first time: ‘The girl was beautiful. Her white gown began just above her breasts and came in tight at her waist and full down to her ankles where it ended and allowed spike-heeled silver shoes to glister clean and clear.’¹¹⁹ Even when Leda is in the hospital after her car accident, Leda is described as a beautiful woman: ‘even in the light and with the gauze and the weakness of her body, she was beautiful. It was the supple line of her lips, and the way her glance seemed plaintive and lost.’¹²⁰ In addition to being described in feminine terms, like Madame d’Aiguines, Leda is also the sexual aggressor in her relationship with Mitch. Both Leda and Madame d’Aiguines are portrayed as temptresses; both of them are the older woman in the relationship, and they are both adored and sexually desired by men (Leda’s boyfriend Jake and Madame d’Aiguines’ husband).

If we apply Inness’s comparison to the characters in Packer’s novel *Leda*, as the feminine lesbian, presents more of a threat to heterosexist social structures than Mitch. In the story, it is very easy for Leda to lie about her relationship with Mitch. After Kitten and Casey find Leda and Mitch, who is naked and in a sexually aggressive position, Leda promises Mitch that she’ll ‘handle this just right’ and takes the letter Mitch wrote to her to support her

¹¹⁸ Packer, p.5

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.8.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

claims that Mitch has an obsession with her. From Leda's thoughts, Packer indicates how easy it is for Mother Nesselbush and the Tri Ep committee to believe her lies:

Of course, they believed the story. It had been easy to tell it, Leda thought; not easy, but the only way. It had been the only way to tell it. Strange how she had thought that she would do it just this way if they were found, in that quick flash of intuition a second before they were found [...] All of the thoughts came quickly to Leda, solved in seconds, because they believed her. There was Mitch upstairs, waiting, trusting, but the time was now, downstairs, and Leda began slowly, her words careful and well remembered.¹²¹

Though Leda's story is corroborated by Mitch's letter and eye witnesses, the reason that the sorority so easily accepts Leda's words is because of the privilege afforded to her by her beauty. According to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, 'Femininity becomes a mask that dominates/resolves a masculine identification [...] the donning of femininity as a mask may reveal a refusal of a female homosexuality [...].'¹²² In other words, in a heteropatriarchal society, if a woman embodies the feminine ideal, she is also assumed to be heterosexual. Through Leda's socially sanctioned femininity she is assumed to be heterosexual, while Mitch's inherent 'difference' and androgyny pre-condemns her in the eyes of the sorority. When Leda vocalises her fear that Mitch may tell a different story, Mother Nesselbush exclaims, 'Now really, do you think anyone would believe the child? She's obviously demented.'¹²³ Moreover, taking Inness' analysis into account, the sorority sisters also *want* to believe that Leda is telling the truth. They have not only known Leda longer than Mitch, but Mitch's lesbian identity would be considered less of a threat, than Leda's. Moreover,

¹²¹ Ibid., p.118.

¹²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.72.

¹²³ Packer, p.120.

because Leda is the poster-child of the sorority – a full length image of Leda is featured in the Tri Ep promotional booklet– even the rumour that Leda could be a lesbian threatens the sorority’s social position on campus.¹²⁴ Mitch, as a new rush, would be far easier for them to sweep under the rug.

Ultimately, Packer’s story reverses the social assumptions about lesbian stereotypes. As Inness points out, the image of the mannish lesbian in popular culture ‘persists as the most common American stereotype’ because it is a socially-sanctioned and easily identified image.¹²⁵ Even though I argue that Mitch is a lesbian figure, she is ultimately absorbed into heteropatriarchal society and made to participate in compulsory heterosexuality by other characters in the book. Likewise, Packer was made to inscribe heterosexual identity to Mitch through publication restrictions placed on books in the early 1950s. Hence, Packer’s novel subverts heterosexist stereotypes and assumptions about lesbian identity. Moreover, within Packer’s novel, there is a *treatment* for Mitch’s (the masculine female’s) homosexual desire; meanwhile, the alluring Leda is sent to an asylum, with no promise of a *cure*.¹²⁶ Therefore, Mitch’s and Leda’s love story can be interpreted as an undermining of the stereotypes ushered into mainstream society by Kraft-Ebbing and Ellis.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.13.

¹²⁵ Inness, p.31.

¹²⁶ In the 1950s through the 1970s, homosexuality in the United States was considered a psychiatric disorder. In *The Construction of Homosexuality* (1988), David F Greenberg notes that ‘In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association seemingly rejected this view of homosexuality by removing it from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*, an official listing of mental illnesses’ (p.429). Published under the name Ann Aldrich, in *We Walk Alone* (1955), Meaker seemingly subscribed to the belief that homosexuality was curable. She writes: ‘The lesbian can be cured; many of them have been. But unless she really wants to be cured, she may not be. It is solely up to her to grant permission for a treatment that will ultimately be successful’ (Aldrich 2006 p.133).

4. Lesbian: Defined inside and outside the text.

In a 2003 NPR interview, Marijane Meaker explains the phenomena of lesbian (and male homosexual) representation in popular media. According to Meaker, stories about lesbians were scarce: 'We didn't exist.'¹²⁷ While novels like *The Well of Loneliness* were popular¹²⁸, until *Spring Fire*, publishers did not believe there was an audience for lesbian fiction.¹²⁹ So while Meaker had to fashion the ending of her novel to meet heterosexist publishing standards, she saw it as an opportunity to get her story published. 'It was more important to have us there' she claims.¹³⁰ Though the ending to *Spring Fire* caters to heteronormative social and legal restrictions, the homosexual readers would not have found the ending sincere. Meaker claimed that 'they also wouldn't care that much, because more important was the fact that there was a new book about us.'¹³¹ Moreover, unlike the medical tomes written by Ellis and Kraft-Ebbing, lesbian pulp fiction was readily available at newsstands, drug stores, and bus depots; and for less money.¹³² For readers (regardless of

¹²⁷ Marijane Meaker, interviewed by Terri Gross, *Fresh Air: Writer Marijane Meaker*, June 18, 2003, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1303128>>, accessed: 12 August, 2013.

¹²⁸ In the first month of *The Well of Loneliness*'s publication 20,000 copies were sold. (Inness 1997 p.15)

¹²⁹ In the forward to *Spring Fire*, Packer recounts Dick Carroll's words to her regarding her book: 'I'm taking a big chance here because this is the story you told me you wanted to write. Fawcett Publications is taking a chance, too. Do you really think there's much of an audience out there for this?' (Packer 2004 p.vii)

¹³⁰ *Fresh Air: Writer Marijane Meaker*,

¹³¹ Packer, p.viii.

¹³² From *Queer Pulp*: 'Offered for sale in bus depots and drugstores rather than book shops catering to a supposedly higher-brow clientele, paperbacks were the transitory and transportable artifacts of an increasingly mobile and uprooted society. Small enough to slip into a purse or a jacket pocket, cheap enough to throw away, they were produced for a culture accustomed to ease and hooked on speed [...]' (Stryker 2001 p.5). In the forward to *Spring Fire*: 'Suddenly, we [lesbians] were on the newsstands and in the magazine stores, right up front on the racks' (Packer 2004 p.vii).

sexuality), lesbians pulp fiction provided a means of discovering what lesbianism was. Though the accuracy of lesbian figures in popular media was (and is) questionable, lesbian pulps, as Meaker claims, were one of the few mediums through which lesbian identity formation was possible. Like the uninformed Susan Mitchell, lesbians would have been able to seek out some form of definition and identification of what it meant to be a lesbian in 1950s America.

Before Leda tells Mitch that she ‘couldn’t love [her] if [she was] a lesbian,’¹³³ Mitch is completely unaware of what ‘lesbian’ means. Confused, Mitch searches through a dictionary in the bedroom she shares with Leda. Within *Spring Fire*, Packer provides the following definition:

Les’bi-an (lěz’bī-ăn) *adj.* **1.** Of or pertaining to Lesbos (now Mytilene), one of the Aegean Islands. **2.** Erotic;--in allusion to the reputed sensuality of the people of Lesbos.

As Packer writes, the dictionary provides Mitch with no clear information about what it means to be a lesbian, let alone the medical and psychological definitions that come from the works of Ellis, Kraft-Ebbing, and Freud. Throughout the novel our understanding of lesbians and lesbianism are governed through the definitions and passages Packer provides the reader. Moreover, Packer only presents the text-book-like passages on lesbianism when Mitch’s self-conscious state is heightened by the scrutiny of others. This passage is recalled when Leda’s mother, Jan is visiting:

[Mitch] had found the explanation for the word in a thick volume on the psychology shelf in the library. A Lesbian was abnormal, a female who could not have satisfactory relations with a male, but only with another female, and Mitch knew it had been that way. A bisexual could love both sexes, and Leda loved Mitch, and she was with Jake like that too. Mitch

¹³³ Packer, p.80

thought back to the crushes she had had in boarding school, awful emotional orgies in which she had idolized certain teachers, and Miss English, the dietician, and there had never been any boys. Until Leda, there had been no one who had set her whole body pulsing with the sweet pain and the glory in the end. That was abnormal.¹³⁴

In this context, Leda has forsaken Mitch's attentions in favour of her Mother's. As the three of them sit in Leda and Mitch's room, Jan is staring at Mitch, who is attempting to distract herself from the awkward situation. Asking about Mitch's love interests, Jan's face shows 'a mixed look of repulsion and pity,' leading Mitch to feel 'that Jan knew she was abnormal.'¹³⁵ While Jan comments later that Mitch is a 'peculiar girl,' Packer gives no indication that Jan suspects that Mitch has feelings for her daughter, Leda.¹³⁶

Again, when Mitch feels uncomfortable under the gaze of others, she remembers a text book passage on lesbians. As Charlie stares at her in French class after their failed sexual encounter, Mitch thinks of the following passage:

The female homosexual, the Lesbian, often preys on girls who are not true homosexuals. Such girls may enjoy men, and be capable of normal heterosexual life if they do not become involved with a genuine Lesbian type, whose technique is often more skilful than that of man of her young men suitors [...] A normal man finds sex with this type of woman extremely difficult if not impossible [...] Many times, under the proper circumstances, a female homosexual may learn to control, if not eliminate her active homosexual tendencies once she is removed from an environment where the temptation is great.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Packer, p.83.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.84.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.103-104.

Like the encounter with Leda and Leda's mother, Mitch is placed in a state of anxiety and paranoia over being discovered as a lesbian; as different from the heterosexual community. Through both instances, Packer provides her readers with an example of how powerful the influence of academic language can be. Because of the medical nature of Mitch's research, she takes the information as truth. Disseminated from a position of authority – the campus library – Mitch, like many others in the 1950s, does not doubt or question the text-book definition of 'lesbian.' Accepting the information as fact proves to be detrimental to Mitch, making her paranoid that everyone can sense her homosexuality, or that others see it clearly marked on her body. Ultimately, the effect of medically-defined language used to describe lesbians in *Spring Fire* is drawn from the medical texts circulating in popular non-fiction.

Accepting lesbian identity prior to the civil rights movement was a potentially harrowing process. Additionally, how an individual defines identity labels is very specific to that individual's experience. For example, Julia Penelope referred to herself as *homosexual*, *queer*, and *gay* before settling on a *lesbian* identity:

When I finally called myself *Lesbian* in 1972, I had no idea how drastically my life would change. Being a Lesbian was very different from being "gay."

For one thing, I was no longer a member of a group that consisted primarily of men, their concerns, their language [...] And it was the label *Lesbian* that ignited my desire for a community of women like myself.¹³⁸

Through Penelope's experience, we can see the potential for a great deal of variation in lesbian experience. Most importantly, the passage highlights the difference between pre-

¹³⁸ Julia Penelope, *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory*, (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1992), p.19.

Stonewall and post-Stonewall concepts of lesbianism ('lesbian' vs. 'Lesbian').¹³⁹ Because defining female homosexuality pre-Stonewall fell into the hands of sexologists, psychologists, and medical professionals – all writing from heterosexist perspectives – the definition of 'lesbian' had a negative connotation.¹⁴⁰ According to Inness, Freudian psychology is attributed to a change in medical theory from the psychically-based 'invert' model (Kraft-Ebbing / Ellis) to a psychological model for the causes of homosexuality. In Inness's words: '[...] by accepting Freud's statements about the sources of lesbianism, a woman could never feel completely secure in her sexual orientation. A tendency to homosexuality may surface at any time to challenge the tenuous grasp she has on heterosexuality.'¹⁴¹ As Jan Campbell explains in *Arguing with the Phallus* (2000), Freud's concept of the Oedipal complex formed the pathology that the American Psychoanalytic Association adopted that would inspire a proliferation of medical discourse on homosexuality in the 1940s and 1950s. Campbell argues that Freud had contradictory views on homosexuality, and mainly focused on male homosexuality with lesbian only mentioned as a side note:

Homosexuality is, for Freud, an inversion of normal sexuality, but is also a part of the naturally occurring polymorphous perversity of infantile life. A perversity, then, that had to be given up in order to accede to the heterosexual difference and sublimation of the Oedipal complex.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ 'Stonewall' refers to the Stonewall Uprising ('riot') On June 28th 1969, involving a gay bar (The Stonewall) run by the mafia.

¹⁴⁰ To some extent, groups in the United States and other places still define 'lesbian' with a negative and limiting light. Media portrayals of lesbian characters are still subject to stereotypes. For a wider discussion of lesbian identity and definition, refer to the introduction.

¹⁴¹ Inness, p.27.

¹⁴² Jan Campbell, *Arguing with the Phallus: Feminist, Queer, and Post-Colonial Theory*, (London: Zed Books, 2000), p.132.

It is this ‘perversity’ that the psychoanalytic community focused on and disseminated through scientific literature. Even Ann Aldrich (Vin Packer / Marijane Meaker) would later echo these beliefs in *We Walk Alone* (1955).¹⁴³ Because of the historical emphasis on the *abnormality* of female homosexuality in medical discourse, we are better able to understand Mitch’s fear of being discovered as *different*. As far as she is aware, Mitch is isolated in her condition because the world around her – the sororal world – does not want lesbians. Even her lover does not want her if she is lesbian, and so she fears being one.

Mitch, like many lesbians in the 1950s, grew to fear and loath lesbian identity because heteropatriarchal social structures perpetuated messages that they should resist and repress homosexual urges. In the penultimate chapter of *We, Too, Must Love* (1958), Ann Aldrich published a sample of the letters she received in response to *We Walk Alone*. Many of the letters hint at fear and self-loathing in her lesbian readers.¹⁴⁴ One reader writes: ‘I do not want to be a lesbian. I know I would be very unhappy if I could not get married and be normal, but I cannot seem to get my mind off this woman.’¹⁴⁵ The other letters have a similar tone, expressing a negative association with what it means to be a lesbian. As Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon point out in *Lesbian/Woman*, ‘The fact that the Lesbian is not generally thought of in terms of her humanity, her close relationship to family, her deep involvement with society,

¹⁴³ ‘According to Freud, [...] The woman who cannot so develop is likely to remain at the retarded homosexual level. Her lover stays fixed on her mother, for whom she is ever seeking substitutes [...] Adler insisted that this retardation was a voluntary one on the part of the homosexual female, who is unable to accept the fact that she does not have the penis she envies and willfully attempts to be like that male whose domination she refuses [...] Whether it is an infantile fixation or a protest of masculinity, Lesbianism is regarded as an arrest of development’ (Aldrich 2006a pp. 11-12).

¹⁴⁴ I must note that I am also referring to Aldrich’s readers who were in question of their sexuality. To say that all of her readers were lesbians would be as limiting as assuming a purely heterosexual readership for a piece of popular literature.

¹⁴⁵ Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2006), p.149.

her sameness rather than her difference, is responsible for the negative self-image she often adopts or must struggle to overcome.’¹⁴⁶ Given the social atmosphere and language of abnormality attributed to lesbianism, we could reasonably assume that if an individual reader did identify as a lesbian, she would be susceptible to feeling the same self-hatred and conflict described through the aforementioned experiences. *Spring Fire* simultaneously perpetuates medical assumptions about lesbianism and questions the myths about lesbians in the 1950s. Through the inner turmoil of Mitch and Leda, we see the effect that medical rhetoric and social pressure place on the process of self-identification. Both young women are placed under the strict social sanctions of sorority life; pressured into having dates with specific men and hiding their sexual practices and assaults for the good of their sorority’s reputation.

In the next chapter, I will revisit *Spring Fire*, along with *Odd Girl Out* to examine the juxtaposition of heterosexual and homosexual romance in both books. Both novels use the sorority environment to compare homosexuality to heterosexuality, and the limitations placed on female sexuality in the 1950s.

¹⁴⁶ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, (Volcano: Volcano Press, 1991), p.25.

Chapter Three

Female (Homo)sexuality in *Odd Girl Out*

Another story of life in a sorority house with the inevitable schoolgirl “crush” on her room mate. However, the treatment here is not so sensational as in most pocket books on this theme. The problems of heterosexual love as well as homosexual love are equally well presented – with understanding and sympathy.

-Gene Damon, “Lesbiana”¹

This review by Gene Damon (Barbara Grier), which appeared in *The Ladder*’s April 1957 issue, provided its readers with a small, but telling overview of Bannon’s first lesbian paperback. The short review indicates that the setting of sorority houses in pulp fiction novels was common amongst other lesbian pulp titles, and the trope of the ‘school girl crush’ was a genre convention that readers would have been all too familiar with. However, while Bannon’s novel followed certain genre conventions, the review promises that *Odd Girl Out* would not follow the work of other pulp authors, and instead deliver a story less sensational and a more sympathetic portrayal of human sexuality. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which Bannon’s first pulp fiction title treats the homosexual and heterosexual relationships between Bannon’s characters. As I discuss in further detail in Chapter Four, Bannon’s work has been described as integral to lesbian literary studies, and formative to lesbian identity for

¹ Gene Damon, ‘Lesbiana’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 1.7, (April 1957), 12.

many in the late 1950s through the 1960s.² As discussed in Chapter Two, writers like Packer and Bannon were under considerable restrictions when it came to the endings of their lesbian romances, yet the titles that were considered 'pro-lesbian pulps' were able to provide readers with 'not so sensational' representations from which to form their sense of identity. This chapter is concerned with the ways in which Bannon uses the genre conventions ushered in by *Spring Fire's* publication and provides its readers with more explicit criticism of the limitations on female sexuality in the 1950s. Like Vin Packer, Bannon is able to communicate these criticisms through her text, but is able to do so more explicitly through the voice of her characters. Moreover, this chapter argues that the lens of *The Ladder's* LTC invites comparisons to be drawn between the two texts through the literary discussions held by contributors and readers between the magazine's pages.

Amongst the controversy of Ann Aldrich's representational politics discussed in *The Ladder*, Jeanette H Foster wrote a scathing and less than professional review of *Carol in A Thousand Cities*,³ in which she posited that Ann Aldrich and Ann Bannon were the same author. In the same review where she claims Aldrich suffered from 'diarrhea [SIC] of the pen,'⁴ Foster claimed that based on a comparison of Vin Packer's work and the work of Ann

² Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson. "The Greyhound Bus Station in the Evolution of Lesbian Popular Culture." *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*. Ed. Sally Munt. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 95-114; Walters, Suzanna Danuta, Walters, 'As Her Hand Crept, Slowly Up her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp,' *Social Text*, 23, (Fall/Winter 1989); 83-101; Kate Adams, 'Making the World Safe for the Missionary Position: Images of the Lesbian in Post-World War II America,' in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (London: New York University Press, 1990), 255 -274. Meredith Miller, 'Secret Agents and Public Victims: The Implied Lesbian Reader,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 35.1, (Summer 2001), 37-58.

³ Jeanette H Foster, 'Ann of 10,000 Words Plus', in *The Ladder*, 4.11, (August 1960), pp.7-9.

⁴ Ibid, p.8

Bannon, it was possible to ‘infer beyond reasonable doubt that [Aldrich/Packer] is also Ann Bannon.’ Foster’s hypothesis includes the following reasoning:

Packer’s *SPRING FIRE* and Bannon’s quartet are fruits of some young but searing experience(s?) which somebody has had to write out of her system. Then she got herself psyched – or maybe employed Horney’s “self-analysis” – and decided to Grow Out of It. Saw a lot of life at first hand and paid her way by using it as fictional copy. Also doubtless got plenty of chances to quit being “emotionally arrested” in the Freudian sense. Whether she took them or how well she likes them you can jolly well reason and guess for yourself. I’m not going to court!⁵

In other words, because *Spring Fire* and *Odd Girl Out* shared a similar theme of sorority lesbian love affairs, Foster believed the work to belong to the same author. Foster was subsequently chastised for her assumptions in a later issue. Foster’s review comes across as more than negative; the tone of her writing is vicious. While Foster may have had valid criticisms about the hypocrisy of Aldrich’s review of *The Ladder*, the cruel tone of her review undermines the elevated tone previously adopted by *The Ladder*. Foster’s knee-jerk reaction to Aldrich did not go without comment from readers.

Two letters in the October 1960 issue voice the disappointment of two readers. In a letter by ‘J.L.’ of California, notes how ‘belligerent’ *The Ladder’s* response was to Aldrich’s book. Similarly, a letter from ‘ML’ of California expresses her surprise and disappointment that Foster’s review was permitted ‘to be printed in the pages of THE LADDER.’⁶ The

⁵ Ibid, pp.8-9.

⁶ ‘I expected to find THE LADDER’S response to Miss Aldrich’s “expose” a logical rebuttal to her statements, and Del Martin did this very satisfactorily. However, the status of THE LADDER as respectable magazine dropped several points with the publishing of Miss Foster’s disgusting bit of name-calling mud-slinging propaganda.’ – ‘Readers Respond,’ in *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin, 5.1, (October 1960), 21-26, p. 24.

aforementioned letter from 'JL' scolds Foster for making this inference: 'For heaven's sake, how can anyone say that Ann Aldrich and Bannon are the same? Miss Bannon writes a good story in an excellent style and sympathetic manner [...] Ann Bannon is our friend; Ann Aldrich certainly is not.' In the same 'Readers Respond' column *The Ladder* printed a letter from Ann Bannon. From Bannon's letter, it is apparent that she had sent a 'friendly little subscription note,' which was never acknowledged, or printed in the magazine. In a tone that seems to take offense to Foster's assumptions, Bannon promises, 'I am not now, never have been, and have no intention of becoming Ann Aldrich-Vin Packer.' Bannon admits that she had 'a brief acquaintance' with Aldrich in the early days of her career, when Aldrich 'very kindly encouraged' Bannon to write.⁷ Bannon continues her letter, defending Aldrich against the personal attacks made by Foster: 'At any rate, Miss Aldrich is a very capable writer and an intelligent girl.'⁸ Despite her willingness to defend Aldrich, Bannon continues to differentiate her opinion of *The Ladder* from Aldrich's:

I wish to dissociate myself completely from Miss Aldrich's personal opinions vis-a-vis THE LADDER, DOB, and homosexuals in general. In fact, I have often recommended THE LADDER to some of the frustrated and/or lonely and curious people who take the trouble to write me -- and there are a good many.⁹

This letter represents the only document belonging to Ann Bannon within the pages of *The Ladder*. While one letter is not enough to establish an influential impact on a textual

⁷ Bannon read *Spring Fire* (1952) and had correspondence with Marijane Meaker, who introduced her to Dick Carroll. This led to the publication of *Odd Girl Out* (1957).

⁸ 'Readers Respond,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin, 5.1, (October 1960), 21-26, p.25.

⁹*Ibid.*, p.26.

community, the letter serves as an example of the direct contributions made to *The Ladder* by lesbian pulp fiction writers.

Like Aldrich, Bannon's reputation as an author within this lesbian textual community must be contextualised. By drawing on the reviews of Bannon's work in *The Ladder*, we are granted access to contemporary discussions of Bannon's work from the perspective of the lesbian readers that would lead to Bannon's further success. Because none of Bannon's fan mail has survived to this day, *The Ladder's* pages are one of the only surviving contemporaneous source materials for explicit reviews of Bannon's contribution to the lesbian literary cannon.¹⁰ Bannon's reputation within this LTC allows us to view Bannon's work through their perspective, and without the need to infer how her work may have been received by lesbian readers at the time. The members of this LTC viewed Bannon's work as important, and that Bannon was a 'friend' to lesbians, unlike the authors of other pulps that represented lesbians less favourably. This perspective shared and debated by members of this LTC invites analysis of Bannon's 'sympathetic' and 'understanding' portrayal of female sexuality through close reading and textual analysis.

Bannon published six novels which are now known as *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*: *Odd Girl Out* (1957), *I am a Woman* (1959), *Women in the Shadows* (1959), *Journey to a Woman* (1960), *The Marriage* (1960), and *Beebo Brinker* (1962).¹¹ In the present, Bannon's work is viewed through a nostalgic lens. While the storylines of her novels are arguably dated because they have been republished several times, her work has been given a stable and

¹⁰ Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001).

¹¹ All of Bannon's pulps, excluding *The Marriage* have been republished by Naiad and Cleiss press. Bannon's pulp fiction novels are discussed in Chapter Four.

sentimental place within lesbian literary history. In comparison to Aldrich, Bannon's work was not reviewed nearly as frequently, nor with as much controversy; however, her works that were reviewed, were done so more favourably than Aldrich's work.

Through several publications of *The Ladder*, Barbara Grier provided brief reviews and recommendations of Bannon's paperbacks; three of Bannon's books were viewed in a favourable light -- *Odd Girl Out*,¹² *I am A Woman*,¹³ and *Journey to a Woman*.¹⁴ In contrast, *Women in the Shadows* was reviewed as 'negative' and 'unhappy'¹⁵ and *Beebo Brinker* was considered 'a disappointment.'¹⁶ At first, the differing reviews of Bannon's books suggest that her reputation as an author is inconsistent. However, an examination of Grier's choice of words may suggest an overall kinder evaluation of Bannon's work in comparison to the way in which Aldrich's work was represented in *The Ladder*. Considering that Bannon's work was

¹² 'However, the treatment here is not so sensational as in most pocket books on this theme. The problems of heterosexual love as well as homosexual love are equally well presented --with understanding and sympathy.' -- See Chapter 3, note 1.

¹³ 'The book is very realistic, the writing is excellent for a paperback, and the ending is so very happy that it sets the book almost in a class by itself. The author is sympathetic throughout, but she pulls no punches. She definitely realizes the drawbacks as well as the advantages.' -- Lennox Strong, 'The Lesbian in Contemporary Literature,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 3.5, (February 1959),16-68. pp.16-17.

¹⁴ 'This is Miss Bannon's fourth Lesbian novel and perhaps it is her best to date. It is clear that she is becoming a spokesperson for her people. Once again she writes of the same group of people [...], but this novel goes back to the other heroine of the first book, Beth, and covers fully a 10-year period in her characters' lives [...] 'Very Highly recommended for everyone' - Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 4.8, (May 1960), 10-11, p. 10.

¹⁵ 'In this latest and possibly last novel on Laura, the tone has changes from positive to negative, and the story begins on an unhappy note for almost everyone concerned' followed by a summary of the plot. -- Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana,' in *The Ladder* ed. Phyllis Lyon, 4.7, (April 1950), 17-18, p.18.

¹⁶ 'Flatly, this is a disappointment. Bannon, who built a reasonably successful homosexual world in her previous titles, has here fallen short of her own writing standards. The magic of Beebo simply isn't there, and probably it's our fault, since I understand this book was written more or less by popular demand.' -- Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana,' in *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin, 7.1,(October 1962), 23.

the subject of much praise in *The Ladder* and within a wider contemporary lesbian textual community, it is surprising that Jeanette Foster would make the assumption that Bannon and Packer were the same author.

Bannon's letter serves as her only directly published contribution to *The Ladder*, but in this solitary letter, she raises several points about the publishing politics of lesbian pulp fiction. In her letter, Ann Bannon adamantly denies being Ann Aldrich, but does reveal that they are connected through a shared publisher, and that she considered Aldrich to be 'a very capable writer and an intelligent girl.'¹⁷ In response to Jeanette Foster's criticism of the use of woman/women in Bannon's titles, Bannon defends herself, stating that the titles of her books 'were put there by market-minded editors,' and thereby beyond her control: 'I might point out to Dr. Foster that my own titles, with one exception, were far more circumspect and completely sexless. Ergo, uncommercial. And they were junked in favour of the flavorsome ones you're familiar with.' In the space of a few sentences, Bannon highlights the reality of lesbian paper novels in the 1950s and 1960s. The *flavoursome* titles, in addition to the slick, sexy covers were never selected by the authors. Because lesbian pulp novels are considered 'low-brow' cultural products, the marketing of paperbacks used the 'sex sells' philosophy in an attempt to catch the eye of potential buyers. Inherently, Bannon's response to Foster's negative remarks highlights the tensions between lesbian representational politics and the portrayal of lesbians and lesbian romance in paperback fiction. In this singular textual contribution to *The Ladder*, Ann Bannon was not only able to defend herself in response to Foster's article. Bannon's letter gives the readers of *The Ladder*'s textual community a glimpse into the limitations placed on paperback authors. Thus, while Bannon's letter may primarily

¹⁷ 'Readers Respond', in *The Ladder*, 5.1, (October 1960), p.25.

serve as a means of distancing herself from Ann Aldrich, it also serves as a means for lesbian readers to contextualise the fictionalised lesbian narratives present in lesbian pulp fiction. With these limitations in mind, it is possible to read into the subtext of Bannon's work, in order to view her work as subversive to heteropatriarchal standards present in the 1950s.

Given the relationship and similarities between *Spring Fire* (1952) and *Odd Girl Out* (1958), it is possible to draw comparisons between them. In this chapter, I seek to investigate the similarities and differences between the two novels. In what way is Bannon's use of the sorority similar and different to the sorority space described by Packer? What messages and criticisms is Bannon able to make, that Packer was not able to? How does the narrative differ between Packer and Bannon's works? In what ways does Bannon discuss female sexuality in her first lesbian pulp? In this chapter, I argue that Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* utilises the college sorority space to criticise 1950s sexual politics. Much like *Spring Fire*, *Odd Girl Out* is critical of the sorority and fraternity environment and the ways in which female sexuality is contained by societal expectations.

1. Female Heterosexuality: Emily and Bud

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan famously examined the plot of American femininity, noting that the path of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood provided a false-promise that women would be fulfilled (sexually and spiritually) simply by marrying and having children.¹⁸ Though Friedan's analysis is predominantly focused on the

¹⁸ Though *The Feminine Mystique* is considered a seminal second-wave feminist text, its interrogation of the place of middle-class white women in America has often been criticised for ignoring issues facing working-

white middle-class women, her book as an historical artefact is particularly valuable when analysing the construction of female sexual identity because it is a response to post-war popular culture. As Joanne Meyerowitz argues, 'Friedan drew on mass culture as much as she countered it.'¹⁹ In other words, Friedan, in assuming that mass media was a force for repression, only perpetuated the idea that popular culture proved oppressive for female identity. It is common, when looking back on the 1950s, to over-simplify the political and social climates when dissecting popular concepts of female sexuality. It is a mistake, however, to view the 1950s (in America) as a simple, backwards era devoted to the image of the nuclear family. To argue that the fifties were a 'simpler' time is naive, and ignores the changes taking place after World War II. Historians like Wini Breines, Donna Penn,²⁰ and Joanne Meyerowitz, among others, have taken the view that the creation of female sexuality in the 1950s is far more complex than the image of the stereotypical, commercialised housewife leads us to believe.²¹ The mere existence of lesbian pulp fiction and its consumption in the 1950s points to complex and ever-changing attitudes toward human sexuality. Reading pulps like *Spring*

class women and women of colour. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond *The Feminine Mystique*: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946–1958", *Journal of American History* 79 (March 1993): 1455–1482; Kristen Fermaglich and Lisa Fine, 'Introduction' in *The Feminine Mystique: The Contexts, The Scholarship on the Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), p.xx.

¹⁹ Meyerowitz, p.32.

²⁰ Donna Penn, 'The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,' in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 358-381.

²¹ Beth Bailey, *From Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), and *Sex in the Heartland*, (Harvard University Press, 2009). ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=3300480>. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics and Sexual Communities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998 2nd Ed.); John D'Emilio and Estelle B Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (London : University of Chicago Press, 1997 2nd ed.)

Fire and *Odd Girl Out* help to illustrate the contradictory messages sent to women through mass-media in the 1950s.

It is important to note here that Ann Bannon shared the experience of the unhappy women in Friedan's book. In the late 1950s, Ann Bannon was a 'young housewife living in the suburbs of Philadelphia,'²² and recent graduate from university with what she describes as an 'ornamental' degree in higher education.²³ Like Vin Packer, Bannon wanted to tell a story based on her experience in a university sorority. In her introduction to *Odd Girl Out*, Bannon describes her motivation behind writing a lesbian romance:

I started to tell the story of a college sorority friend, heavily disguised of course, whose sexuality I suspected and who has aroused feelings in me that I both feared and enjoyed. I wanted to tell her story, and by telling hers to explore my own. I had absolutely no idea that I was on the cutting edge of anything, that I was about to catch a wave, or that others beside myself were engaged in similar creative tasks.²⁴

With Packer's help²⁵, Bannon would see some of the same success as *Odd Girl Out* became 'the second-best selling paperback book of 1957.'²⁶ Even further, Bannon received fan letters from men and women; the letters from the women affirming that Bannon's (and Packer's) book managed to help isolated lesbian readers feel connected, and 'not totally alone in the

²² Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001), p.v.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.vi.

²⁵ After receiving a letter from Bannon, Packer 'was kind enough to invite [Bannon] to bring the unwieldy first draft of *Odd Girl Out* to New York' and introduce her to Dick Carroll. Bannon, pp. vi-v ii.

²⁶ Bannon, p. vii.

world.’²⁷ The letters would inspire Bannon to help her readers the only way she knew how: by writing more paperbacks about lesbian romance.

Ann Bannon’s first novel explores human sexuality and love through a love triangle between Laura Landon, Beth Cullison, and Charlie Ayers.²⁸ Laura is a college freshman, and is unsure of her identity, while Beth is a confident senior, who has given up on dating men because she cannot seem to find the right one. Bannon pits Laura against Charlie for Beth’s affections. In the midst of romantic rivalry, both Beth and Laura come to a better understanding about their sexual selves. Compared to *Spring Fire*, *Odd Girl Out* explores female sexuality (and homosexuality) more candidly, and in a way that illustrates how sexual identity may be more fluidly defined. Moreover, unlike *Spring Fire*, *Odd Girl Out* ends in a more positive light. In the train station, Laura assures Beth, ‘You’re meant for a man. Like Charlie. I’m not. I’m not afraid to go [to New York], I’m not sorry, and I love you [...] But I wouldn’t have the strength to face it [her sexual identity] if I didn’t.’²⁹ Though Laura and Beth do not have a ‘happy ending’ together, Bannon leaves her readers with hope for Laura’s future happiness.

²⁷ Ibid., p. x.

²⁸ While Bannon’s *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* are often viewed as a collection, the ‘irresistible butch’ (Bannon 2001 xi), Beebo Brinker does not appear in *Odd Girl Out*. Moreover, the femme, Laura Landon’s origin story changes between the first and second novel. According to Kate Brandt, the discrepancy in Laura’s origin story exists because Bannon ‘didn’t re-read *Odd Girl Out*,’ which Bannon attributes to the fact that she ‘was almost afraid to take them [her stories] seriously.’ Brandt, p.78. These changes in storyline, along with the fact that Bannon did not originally intend to continue Laura’s story, leads me to view *Odd Girl Out* as separate from the rest of the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, which I will analyse in the following chapter. For now, I will focus on the representations of heterosexual and homosexual romance in *Odd Girl Out*, paying attention to the similarities and differences in Packer’s own juxtaposition of heterosexual and homosexual love.

²⁹ Bannon, p.212.

While the title, 'Odd Girl Out' was not chosen by Bannon, the perhaps unintentional connection between the novel's content and the processing of 'coming out' in a (homo)sexual context is undeniable. Simultaneously, the title also connotes the 'coming-out' parties of *debutants*.³⁰ In general terms, *Odd Girl Out* is a story in which three young women (Laura, Emily, and Beth) participate in the process of their own sexual awakenings, though they begin at different stages in their maturity. In my reading of *Odd Girl Out*, I hope to expand upon the language of the closet, both in heterosexual and homosexual terms. I will be drawing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. Though Sedgwick focuses upon the issues facing male homosexual identity, her discussion of *the closet* and the hetero/homosexual binary is valuable to our understanding of the hetero/homosexual binary as it exists in lesbian pulp fiction and popular discourse of 1950s America. Through analysis of the heterosexual and homosexual plots in Bannon's novel, I will show a shift from the McCarthyism-inspired censorship of earlier lesbian pulps. Moreover, the implications of the sexual narrative of each of Bannon's heroines provide readers with implicit illustrations of the intersection of the issues facing both heterosexual and homosexual women in the 1950s.

Before discussing Bannon's depiction of female homosexuality, it is important to analyse the heterosexual subplot of *Odd Girl Out*. Outside of the Laura-Beth-Charlie love triangle, the heterosexual relationship between Emily and Bud functions as a means of questioning societal constraints on female (hetero)sexuality. Like the relationships in *Spring Fire*, the romantic plots of *Odd Girl Out* are positioned within the Greek System. Like the Tri Epsilon sorority in *Spring Fire*, the Alpha Beta sorority in *Odd Girl Out* proves to be a

³⁰ The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'to come out' as '13. To show oneself publicly (in some character or fashion); to declare oneself (in some way); to make a public declaration of opinion. Also *spec.* to acknowledge publicly one's homosexuality.' And '15. To make a formal entry into 'society' on reaching womanhood (a recognized indication of this in English society being presentation at court).'

constraining force on the romance between Emily and her frat brother boyfriend, Bud. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the sorority functions as a chaperone system, promising parents that their daughters' virginity will remain intact while they are away from home. Not only did sororities act like a social chastity belt, but their status as an extracurricular institution served as a dating service for young women looking for a middle/upper-class husband.

In a way, sororities, as match-makers, contributed to the educational distraction of young women in the 1950s. As Betty Friedan points out in *The Feminine Mystique*, the 1950s saw a rise in the number of women going to university. Despite this trend, 'fewer and fewer college women were preparing for any career or profession requiring more than the most casual commitment.'³¹ In essence, the college experience for women became enmeshed with the idea that women only attended university to look for 'a good husband.'³² Responding to this change in the goals of female students, educators adjusted to sex-directed education for women. According to Friedan, through various courses designed for female students, women were educated in preparation for their roles as wives and mothers. Moreover, the discussion of female sexuality was institutionalised and confined (or closeted) to heterosexual intercourse within marriage.³³

³¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p.119.

³² Of the college women Friedan interviewed, many of them had the attitude that university was a delay on their journey to achieving their life's goal of marrying and having children: 'These girls behaved as if college were an interval to be got through impatiently, efficiently, bored but businesslike, so 'real' life could begin. And real life was when you married and lived in a suburban house with your husband and children.' Friedan, p.122.

³³ 'The discussion on premarital intercourse usually leads to the scientific conclusion that it is wrong. One professor builds up his case against sexual intercourse before marriage with statistics chosen to demonstrate that premarital sexual experience tends to make marital adjustment more difficult. The student will not know

Friedan's portrayal of the 1950s female university student enables a deeper reading of characters like Leda Taylor (*Spring Fire*) and Emily (*Odd Girl Out*). Packer's main character, Leda, is never written into an academic setting. Moreover, the only connections made between Leda and education comes at the end of the *Spring Fire*, when Mitch's infatuation with Leda is investigated by the Dean of Women: in addition to her frequent violation of sorority curfew, '[Leda's] scholastic report was not always good. There were alarming high and low points, and a strange proclivity toward extremes. A's and D's. B's and C's.'³⁴ Despite Leda's irresponsibility, Leda's feminine beauty is what excludes her from being suspected of homosexuality by the sorority and the University. Within the context of the novel, we can infer that Leda is assumed straight because of her heterosexual relationship to Jake. However, if we take Friedan's evidence into a present-day reading of the text, we can infer that Leda's femininity – and by extension, her assumed heterosexuality – is in part due to Leda's uninterested attitude toward her studies.

The same analysis can be made when engaging in a close reading of Emily in *Odd Girl Out*. Unlike Leda, Bannon has characterised Emily as unfalteringly heterosexual; as I will analyse later in this chapter, Emily displays an unconditional infatuation towards Bud, her romantic love interest. While there are a few scenes where we see Emily studying, Bannon primarily situates Emily in the text in terms of her relationship with Bud.³⁵ Though Emily never

of the other statistics which refute this point; if the professor knows of them, he can in the functional marriage course feel free to disregard them as unfunctional.' (Friedan, p.135).

³⁴ Vin Packer, *Spring Fire* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004), p.129

³⁵ Increasingly in the text, Bannon situates Emily in her connection with Bud: '[Beth] knew why Emily spent most of her free time – and there was very little of it now, since she saw Bud every night – practicing on the old piano in the living room. There was an almost pathetic childish ingenuousness to her plan to capture Bud that made Beth feel sad and helpless [...] Her particular schedule usually kept her out with Bud or down in the living room until bed time' (Bannon 2001, p.35).

explicitly complains about academic work, we can infer that her desire for Bud is overriding any desire for professional pursuits. As Emily and Leda demonstrate, the status of higher education for women in popular culture was relegated to the status of tedium and irrelevancy. Friedan, like many others, noted the popular ideology that placed femininity in opposition with intellectual pursuits. In Friedan's words, young women gained a fear that they had to enter heteropatriarchal marriage and family 'before they became so "intellectual" that, heaven forbid they wouldn't be able to enjoy sex 'in a feminine way.'³⁶ However, Bannon does not simply follow this popular ideology; on the contrary, Emily's romantic plot allows for a questioning of the socially prescribed heterosexuality of the 1950s.

As noted above, Emily and Bud are portrayed as having an involved relationship and Bannon creates the relationship as predominantly one-sided, at least initially. Bannon introduces us to their relationship through a double date with Laura and Jim:

Emily was the only girl who had ever come near to hooking [Bud]. It wasn't the physical attraction; Bud liked them all pretty; he wouldn't have taken her out the first time unless she had fulfilled that qualification. It wasn't her twinkling charm or her compliance, either; it was all of these plus her willingness and ability to learn something about music [...] so she could talk to Bud in his own language. All these attractions weren't enough to keep him from surveying the field and finding a little competition for her, but as it happened that was the best possible way to intrigue Emmy, who liked to "work for a man."³⁷

Ultimately, the relationship between Bud and Emily forces Emily to 'work' to keep Bud's affections focused on her; this reflects the dating methods advised by popular magazines to their young female audience. According to Lynn Peril, advertisements in young women's

³⁶ Friedan, p.138.

³⁷ Bannon, p.29.

magazines questioned the marriageability of women who chose to go to university.³⁸ One 1940s advertisement for Dura-Gloss nail polish advises young women on how to be successful in school:

DON'T

Entertain a new boyfriend by reading William James out loud to him.

DO

Beautify your fingernails with that wonderful long-lasting, gem-hard Dura-Gloss.³⁹

According to Peril, much of the prescriptive literature intended for young college women in the mid-twentieth century 'suggested that female intelligence should be hidden, lest it frighten men off, and described college as a smorgasbord of prospective husbands rather than a place of learning.'⁴⁰ There was remarkable pressure placed on young women in the 1950s to find husbands at University. According to Beth Bailey, marriage 'skyrocketed' after WWII.⁴¹ Moreover, even as women attended Universities, some institutions of higher learning introduced courses on domestic duties to prepare women for marriage and motherhood.⁴² Thus the demands were placed on women to hold men's attention was common-place in the 1950s. Moreover, in the 1950s, 'non-marital female sexuality was linked to political threats such as the spread of communism and the subversion of

³⁸ Lynn Peril, *College Girls: Bluestockings, Sex Kittens, and Coeds, Then and Now*, (New York: W W Norton & Company, 2006).

³⁹ Ibid., p.211.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.287.

⁴¹ Bailey, 2009, p.18.

⁴² Barbara A Schreier, *Fitting in: Four Generations of College Life*, (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1991), p.40; Barbara M Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.194; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

democracy.⁴³ At the same time, young women were faced with the pressures of popularity; popular culture and youth culture supported the expression of a sexual self,⁴⁴ and traditional culture, the education system, and media supported the domestic wife and mother as the ideal for women to aspire to.⁴⁵ Thus, within the context of the 1950s, Emily is pressured through society to 'hook' Bud by using sex appeal to keep him interested; however, she is not encouraged to indulge in her sexuality. Moreover, Emily, as a sorority sister is expected to adhere to a set of courtship patterns; according to Barbara Risman, 'Dating game rules are clearly different for each sex; within the Greek system:

The underlying norms and official rules for male-female interaction within the Greek social world are consistent; sororities act *in loco parentis*; fraternities do not. Different rules for boys and girls are accepted by all as both natural and inevitable. The regulations put forth by alumni, but enforced by peer pressure and monetary fines are based on a traditional ideology of gender roles. Under

⁴³ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*, (Boston: Beacon, 1992), p.90. Breines highlights that the fear of Communism in post-war American; Breines argues that American cultural production and politics attempted to defend masculinity and whiteness, and by extension capitalist democracy. 'Fears of communism and fears of female sexuality melded, leading to a policy of containment for both' (p.10). Breines also provides examples of cold war propaganda that 'spread the misogyny of the maternal dominance theme. In propaganda films, subversion was blamed on women who were too independent or who seduced men, sometimes their sons, into being pawns or agents of communism' (p.44). Films like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), for example, depict an over-bearing mother who brainwashes her war-hero son to assassinate a presidential candidate on behalf of communist powers.

⁴⁴ Breines points out that 'Sex was commercialized, glorified in movies, advertising, and movie magazines' (p.86). Additionally, 'Young women were required to chart a treacherous path between the demands of popularity and sexuality [...] Complex rules and conventions were the underside of media glamour, a way to check, even squelch, young feminine sexuality. Teenage sexual etiquette, dating and going steady, channeled female sexuality into a routinized sexual system that controlled and punished female spontaneity and ensured that young women prescribed steps to marriage' (p.113).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.87.

the *formal* rules, it is the male's place to invite the female. He is the aggressor, she the pursued.⁴⁶

While Risman is writing about sororities in the 1970s, the strong sense of tradition upheld by sororities through to the present would suggest that sororities in the 1950s would operate under similar underlying gender norms – especially given the gender norms present in wider 1950s middle class culture. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the fictional Alpha Beta reflects the practices of real contemporary sororities. While Emily is able to date Bud, the social norms of the sorority would not allow her to behave in a sexually aggressive manner towards her love interest. Emily is expected by her sorority and the larger American society to contain her sexuality within a heteropatriarchal closet.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses *the closet* in terms of the way in which (male) homosexuality is hidden and marginalised in (Western) heteropatriarchal cultures. According to Sedgwick, the act of 'coming out' entails a performative speech act, and in a post-Stonewall and Foucauldian context, the act of 'coming out' of the closet has been imbued with the drama of sexual self-discovery.⁴⁷ It may then seem that Emily's status as a heterosexual female is not something to be closeted. However, in the context of 1950s America, female (hetero)sexuality as something to be contained, also suffers the act of 'closeting' and concealment. This is not to say that the experience of heterosexual females in the 1950s is comparable to the experience of homosexual males and females.

⁴⁶ Barbara Risman, 'College Women and Sororities: The Social Construction and Reaffirmation of gender Roles,' in *Urban Life*, 11.2, (July 1982), 231-252, p.241.

⁴⁷ "'Closetedness" itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p.3; p.67.

To do so would be an act of comparing oppressions which is not relevant to my study. The point I wish to make is that Emily, as a heterosexual female character, is not free to express her sexuality to her satisfaction, and thus is pressured to conform to 1950s models of femininity and female heterosexuality. I will be discussing *the closet* further in the section of this chapter on Laura Landon, and in other chapters of this thesis. As Sedgwick argues, ‘for any modern question of sexuality, [the binary of] knowledge/ignorance is more than mere on in a metonymic chain of such binarisms.’⁴⁸ Within Western discourse:

‘knowledge’ and ‘sex’ become conceptually inseparable from one another – so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion – was sketched in Volume I of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. [...] ⁴⁹

While, as Sedgwick highlights, the concept of ‘the closet’ is ‘indicative for homophobia in a way that it cannot be for other oppressions,’ such as racism and sexism, the imagery of the closet and the way it is both used to conceal and contain (homo)sexuality is useful in the ways female sexuality was contained at the time of *Odd Girl Out*’s publication.⁵⁰

Emily experiences the pressure to conceal her sexuality directly through her sorority, which acts as a surrogate family to chaperone and judge her behaviour. This pressure to conform to sorority standards ultimately acts as an attempt to ‘closet’ Emily’s heterosexuality. Throughout the text, Emily engages in public displays of her affection for Bud, most commonly in the public space of Maxie’s, a college Bar. Mary Lou Baker, the Alpha Beta sorority

⁴⁸ Sedgwick, p.73

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.75.

president, looks on Emily, fawning over Bud next to his piano, with disdain: 'Do you think she ought to sit up there like that? In public I mean? It really doesn't look too good.'⁵¹ Mary Lou is portrayed as the most outspoken opponent to the public affections shared between Emily and Bud. In this scenario, we can see an example of the double standard placed on women. Emily performs in a provocative manner, attempting to display her desire for Bud. Emily's presence on stage as Bud plays piano is a way of publicly announcing her intentions with Bud: that they are a couple, and she will do all she can to 'keep' him. At the same time, traditional social etiquette – voiced through Mary Lou – inhibits, and judges her behaviour. The romantic dynamic between Emily and Bud is ultimately impacted by the double standard placed on Emily by the sororal environment (Mary Lou): Emily is pressured to date, or 'go steady,' with a fraternity brother, but once she does, she is expected to adhere to strict dating codes.

In *The Trouble With Normal: Post-war Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality*, Mary Louise Adams argues that the practice of 'going steady' in the 1950s functioned as 'a key aspect of the institutionalization of heterosexuality.'⁵² According to Adams, 'going steady' was a 'part of a larger search for security and stability during the cold war.'⁵³ Moreover, the act of going steady functioned directly under adult influence. Adams notes:

Teachers, journalists, filmmakers advice-book writers, and parents all did their best to keep [going steady] consistent with larger social norms. While boys and girls could mark the boundaries of their social worlds in terms of who was with whom and who was alone, adults attempted to keep limits on the entire dating

⁵¹ Bannon, p.102.

⁵² Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p.98.

⁵³ Ibid., pp.99-100.

system, especially in terms of sexual expression and how interactions between boys and girls reflected contemporary ideologies about gender.⁵⁴

Though Adams is mainly commenting on the dating practices of high school students, the pressures teenagers faced during their adolescence reaches into college dating practices. Ultimately, dating was seen by some as 'practice for marriage' and 'a useful way of training sexuality into a desired mode of expression, of normalizing it.'⁵⁵ Because 1950s dating practices were taught, the concept of 'going steady' lead to the development of dating codes which did not allow for public premarital expression of desire. Thus Mary Lou's reaction to Emily's behaviour fits the stereotype of 1950s conservative sentiment towards overtly displayed female sexuality. Because Emily is not adhering to the dating codes in a chaste manner, Mary Lou finds the behaviour reprehensible. Moreover, by chasing after Bud so publicly, Emily is violating normative gender principles. Emily's transgression is not that she has 'knowledge' of her sexuality, however, but that she openly displays her sexuality and does not contain or 'closet' her sexual desire for Bud.

Mary Lou voices her concerns over Emily's behaviour on a few occasions, but most notably over Emily's decision to wear a revealing 'bikini' to a fraternity costume party. While at the party Emily's costume breaks leaving her topless. When word of Emily's accident reaches Mary Lou, she demands that Emily tell her exactly what happened. Though Emily laughs at the accident, Mary Lou 'found no humour in the situation at all. It was a social fiasco that reflected directly on the good name of Alpha Beta.'⁵⁶ Mary Lou, cautions Emily on her behaviour, making Emily realise that she will have to speak to the dean and the alumnae

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.100.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.101.

⁵⁶ Bannon, p.162.

about what happened.⁵⁷ After the governing powers of the university and the sorority discuss the issue, Mary Lou sternly tells Emily that she ‘completely ignored [her] obligations to the university and the sorority.’⁵⁸ Like the sorority in *Spring Fire*, Alpha Beta and Mary Lou are focused on the collective reputation of the group over the individual; Emily’s punishment is that she must not see Bud for the remainder of her time at the University. In the name of protecting the sorority, Mary Lou chastises Emily:

I’m not trying to hurt you. Believe me, I’m not. I’m trying to do what I can for the sorority. [...] We can’t let everyone point at Alpha Beta and Laugh because *one* Alpha Beta did something wrong. That one Alpha Beta has to correct the error. It’s simple logic, and only fair.⁵⁹

In this passage, Bannon overtly shows the pressures placed on members of the sorority to conceal (or closet) their sexuality in the name of reputation. Mary Lou does not chastise Emily for being a sexual being, or for loving Bud, but she chastises Emily for making her sexuality public.⁶⁰ As Adams points out, the institutionalised act of ‘going steady’ would permit young men and women to participate in premarital courtship while preserving their reputations. Going steady allowed young couples’ access to sexual behaviour (and intercourse) ‘so long as they didn’t get caught.’⁶¹ However, the double standards of sexuality meant that if a young

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.164.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.164-165

⁶⁰ According to Wini Breines, young women were held to a vicious double standard in the 1950s. Sexual messages supported in popular media told young women that they should be ‘sexy’ in appearance, but never sexual in their behaviour: ‘Sexiness never lead to sex or pleasure or happiness before marriage’ (Breines 1991, p.108). However, this did not mean women (and men) were denied access to sex. Adams argues that ‘As an institution, going steady allowed both girls and boys to maintain their reputations.’ (Adams, p.105)

⁶¹ Adams, p.105.

woman did act on her sexual impulses with a man and they were caught, all blame was placed on her shoulders. Hence, it is not surprising that Bud does not suffer the consequences in the same way that Emily does. Fault is placed solely on Emily for the outcome of the evening: she is blamed for her choice in costume, being drunk, and the ultimate malfunction of her costume that exposed her breasts to the public. Emily must bear the burden of the accident.⁶² Like in *Spring Fire*, the reputation of the group supersedes an individual's status within the sorority. Mary Lou's sentiments that Emily's punishment is 'simple logic, and only fair' reflects the sentiments of real sororities. According to Lisbeth Berbary, of the sororities she studied, members were subject to a ruling body of sorority members, or Standards; and to the board of alumni, or Nationals.⁶³ The pseudonymous 'Zeta Chi' in Berbary's study utilised members to watch and judge their fellow members and report anything 'inappropriate' to Standards.⁶⁴ 'Members who were brought to Standards accepted their punishment with the recognition that the reputation of the group was more important than their individuality.'⁶⁵

While a majority of sorority sisters would be expected to simply submit to the governing bodies of the sorority, Emily resists. Despite Emily's protest that she is in love with Bud, Mary Lou gives her an ultimatum: She is told to either 'leave school and marry the guy, or not see him for a while.'⁶⁶ If Emily ignores Mary Lou, it is implied that they would quietly remove Emily from the sorority. Emily is left with no choice but to agree to Mary Lou's terms,

⁶² 'In the middle of March Bud's fraternity gave a costume dance, an annual affair for which the girls were required to make their own costumes. They were given one square yard of bright-colored cotton for that purpose and the one who returned the largest piece of unused cloth won first prize.' - Bannon, p.157.

⁶³ Lisbeth A Berbary, "'Don't be a Whore, That's Not Ladylike': Discursive Discipline and Sorority Women's Gendered Subjectivity' in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18.7, (July 2012), 606-625.pp.611-12

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.612

⁶⁶ Bannon, p.166.

but is left fearing that Bud will look for another girlfriend: 'it might be love, all right, but with Bud she had to keep feeding the flame [...] or he would find someone else.'⁶⁷ The language Bannon chooses to describe the relationship between Emily and Bud, hedges on the clichéd: Emily must maintain the 'flames of passion' Bud feels for her in order to maintain their relationship. Nevertheless, the choice of the phrase 'feeding the flame' connotes sacrifice; Emily feels she is expected to make sexual sacrifices of herself in order to maintain her hold on Bud's affections. Moreover, this phrase aligns with the pressure placed on women in heterosexual courtship; or in Breines' words, 'It was the girl's work to control the sexual interaction in order to maintain her reputation.'⁶⁸ Because Mary Lou and the sorority feel that Emily has failed to take control of the sexual interactions between herself and Bud, Mary Lou punishes Emily. By removing Bud from Emily's daily routine, it is implied that Emily will no longer fall victim to Bud's dominant male sexuality.

Bud's reaction to Mary Lou's verdict, however, is not as Emily expects; instead of moving on from her, he 'explodes' and attempts to undermine 'the powers that be in the universities and sororities' by arranging for Emily to secretly meet him in Charlie's apartment.⁶⁹ As per their plan, Charlie offers an unwitting Emily a ride home from class, only to take her to his apartment. In the middle of sexual intercourse, Mary Lou and her boyfriend Mitch (Charlie's roommate) walk in on them.⁷⁰ Mary Lou follows through on her warnings. Though she and Mitch are the only ones aware of Emily's 'transgression,' she makes the

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.167.

⁶⁸ Breines, p.117.

⁶⁹ Bannon, pp.171-174.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp.174-176

decision to come forward about the secret meeting. A panel of alumnae is called to discuss Emily's fate:

They were impressive women, businesslike and efficient, real club women. They enjoyed tackling problems; Emmy's was one of the juiciest in years. They spent a good bit of time congratulating the girls present on their presumed virginity and their unblemished reputations; and a good bit demolishing what was left of Emmy's. They did it with masterful tact.⁷¹

In describing the panel of Alpha Beta alumnae, Bannon's choice of language (*businesslike* and *efficient*) points to the irony in their characterisation. These women of an older generation are presumably within the supposedly stable confines of heteropatriarchal marriage. However, the use of words like 'juiciest' to describe Emily's scandal hints that they too are bored within the confinements of their prescribed heterosexual identity. Bannon's choice of descriptors hints that these women hide in an ivory tower of propriety and morals, but take pleasure in making judgement on the fallen young women who dared to publicly express their sexuality. The joke Bannon makes here is that everything about the judging process is performed; the presumed virginity of the other sorority sisters and Emily's demolished reputation are carried out in the name of appearances. By tarnishing Emily's reputation, they save their own. Moreover, Emily becomes a sacrificial lamb not only to Bud's sexual desires, but to the moral façade of the Alpha Beta sorority. Here too, Bannon illustrates the conflict between modernising and more liberal views of sexuality and an older matronly governing body who still value female virginity. According to Breines, 'For girls of the fifties generation who were positioned between the world of their mothers and the world of women's equality and autonomy, the sexual story encoded in American culture was simultaneously punitive

⁷¹ Ibid., p.181.

and permissive.⁷² Breines' argument supports the idea that in the 1950s world of *Odd Girl Out*, Emily's sexual intimacy with Bud is permitted, so long as it is kept secret from their maternal chaperones and from wider society. Actual virginity is ultimately not as important as 'presumed virginity' when it comes to maintaining the sorority's reputation.⁷³

After the verdict is passed, Emily is forced out of the sorority and university. She must return to disappointed parents, but pleads with Bud to marry her. Her suggestion is very Victorian but perfectly typical of 1950s social sentiment: marriage acts as a solution to scandal. As Breines points out, 'In the 1950s, the single acceptable goal for women was to find fulfilment in the family as wives and mothers.'⁷⁴ Emily subscribes to this goal, as marrying Bud is something she wants throughout the novel. Though Bud promises to marry Emily, they lose touch with each other. Emily writes letters to Beth, though mostly 'brave and hopeful,' Emily's final letter to Beth is 'forsaken and bitter for the first time.'⁷⁵ In the letter, Emily says that Bud has not seen her for two weeks, and she is unable to find work. Afraid to chase him away through embarrassment, Emily does not call him. What is more troubling is that Emily is pregnant with his child: 'Besides, I have some unwelcome news for him. He may *have* to marry me, whether he wants to or not.'⁷⁶ Ultimately, Emily is left with the burden of pregnancy. In the context of marriage, Emily's pregnancy would be socially sanctioned.

⁷² Breines, p.88.

⁷³ Breines also details the 1950s pre-occupation with virginity: 'The preoccupation with virginity, or sexual intercourse, articulated an extreme double standard; punishment that followed from its violation was visited only on females. It is worth mentioning that marriage counsellors and teen advisors believed that females were less sexual than males, a belief with a venerable history and one that suggests that the double standard did not represent real deprivation for girls' - Breines, p.113.

⁷⁴ Breines, p.33.

⁷⁵ Bannon, p.201.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.202.

Instead, Emily's 'illegitimate' pregnancy foretells a life of ostracisation and disappointment. Though both Emily and Bud are complicit in their sexual activity, Bannon finishes Emily's story emphasising that only she will suffer the consequences.

Leda's words to Susan Mitchell after she has been raped by Bud Roberts rings through in Emily's heterosexual romantic tragedy: 'God, it isn't your fault! God knows that. But honey—no one cares when a rule is broken.'⁷⁷ While Emily is at least consenting in her sexual activity with Bud, like Susan Mitchell, Emily must accept all the blame for their sexual transgressions; Emily must face all the punitive judgement, while both Buds will never suffer the consequences. Thus, Emily and Bud's romance, Bannon presents the potentially harmful nature of female heterosexuality in 1950s American culture. Under the pressure of maintaining the guise of virginity, young women were socially pressured into finding a husband. Because their only socially acceptable sexual outlet was through heteropatriarchal marriage, women had to maintain the pretence, that though they were 'going steady,' they were not sexually active. If women were, they had to hide their sexuality within a heteropatriarchal closet. This closet, though different from Sedgwick's closet used to conceal homosexual identities operates similarly in that it functions as a means of repressing and oppressing female (hetero)sexuality through the aforementioned social restrictions placed on dating. Like homosexuality, female premarital (hetero)sexual desire was indeed acted upon in assumed privacy and was expected not to be made public. However, unlike homosexual expression, female sexuality could be acted upon within marital confines. Through one depiction of female sexual practices, Bannon's novel allows for a critique of social sanctions against female sexuality and the inequality between female and male sexuality in 1950s America. By including a heterosexual subplot to her novel, Bannon allows for multiple critiques of normalised female sexuality.

⁷⁷ Packer, p.56.

2. Female Homosexuality: Laura's Lesbian Desire.

The Sorority as the setting for the romance between Beth Cullison and Laura Landon leads us to examine the ways in which Bannon has depicted homosexual relationships against a heterosexual backdrop. The heterosexual context of Laura's homosexuality is significant in our reading for a number of reasons. As I explained in the previous chapter, the sorority environment was a common setting for lesbian pulps. Enforcing strict dating practices and feminine behaviour, sororities promised a sexually sanitised environment for young women in university; parents would encourage their daughters to join a sorority in hopes of maintaining their daughter's reputations and virginity, and in hopes that their daughters would meet potential husbands belonging to a certain social class. In the 1950s context, this practice ultimately participated in what Monique Wittig would consider 'sexual slavery.' According to Wittig, women, subjected to the category of 'sex,' were forced participants in a 'heterosexual economy'. Historically, the very act of marriage, as a business contract, dehumanised women and relegated them to the ownership of men.⁷⁸ Thus the position of sororities as a match-making service participated in this sexual economy, enforcing normalised heterosexuality.⁷⁹ Thus because of the primacy of heterosexuality in 1950s social

⁷⁸ Wittig's arguments are taken from 'The Category of Sex' (1976/1982), ss appears in Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

⁷⁹ Wittig argues, 'The category of sex is the one that rules as "natural" the relation that is at the base of (heterosexual) society and through which half of the population, women, are "heterosexualised" (the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals) and submitted to a heterosexual economy [...] The category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society in which men appropriate for themselves the reproduction and production of women and also their physical persons by means of a contract called a marriage contract.' - Wittig 1992, p.6

discourse, Laura's (lesbian) sexuality as a marginal (non-normal) sexuality is imagined (by Bannon) in terms of normalised heterosexuality.

In Bannon's third chapter, Emily takes Laura out on a double date with her boyfriend, Bud and his fraternity brother, Jim.⁸⁰ While Emily and Bud enjoy themselves, Laura's experience in the student bar is uncomfortable. Jim, much like Bud Roberts⁸¹ in *Spring Fire* takes the date as an opportunity to get drunk:

Fortunately it was not very hard to be friendly at beer parties, and the more beer you drank the easier it was. Not that Laura could ever drink very much. But Jim, Bud's friend, did famously. With every passing quart he got friendlier. Toward the end of the evening anything in skirts was irresistible, and the handiest skirt was Laura's. He made an effort to get better acquainted, draping an arm over her and squeezing her into the corner of the booth with the warm weight of his body. He put a hand on her thigh and began to press it, and Laura looked to Emily in sudden alarm. She hated to let a man touch her and she hated even worse to let him do it in public. But Emily was too preoccupied with Bud to notice that her roommate wanted help.⁸²

Bannon sets up her double date scene, much in the same way that Packer did. Both Laura and Mitch are set up on a date by their roommates and expected to perform to a certain sexual role in the dating ritual. Though Laura is not left completely alone with Jim, her silent pleas are unacknowledged because Emily is preoccupied with Bud. Though not in an isolated space like Mitch and Bud Roberts, Laura and Jim are ignored by the crowd. In this passage, Jim is imagined into the position of dominant masculinity: in other words, as a man, Jim feels he has

⁸⁰ Emily is also referred to as 'Emmy', and is Beth and Laura's roommate.

⁸¹ Because *Spring Fire* and *Odd Girl Out* have characters named Bud, Bud Roberts from *Spring Fire* will be referred to by his full name throughout this chapter.

⁸² Bannon, p.29.

the right to a female body through a promise made by heteropatriarchal society.⁸³ In this case, Jim does not even care which body he is given access to, and is satisfied with Laura's body as the closest to him.

Like Bud Roberts, Jim takes liberties with Laura's body, much to her discomfort. Moreover, Jim misreads Laura's attempt at protest as a way of encouraging his domineering sexual advances. Even Emily and Jim misread the situation: 'They laughed, and Emily gave Laura an approving smile that made Laura weak. It was apparently not only right but expected that she should let Jim maul her.'⁸⁴ As in *Spring Fire*, the heterosexual dating scene reinforces female sexual passivity. However, unlike Packer, Bannon provides readers with an insight into Laura's mind. Unlike Susan Mitchell, Laura Landon attempts to protest, but is made hesitant by her feminine manners. The use of words like 'maul,' signal the association between male sexuality and violence. According to Luce Irigaray, within the sexual imaginary, normalised heterosexual practices dictate the *passivity* of women and the *activity* of men.⁸⁵ In Western discourse, the Oedipal development of male sexuality is thought in often violent terms: 'the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he has been conceived.'⁸⁶ Thus, in Laura's mind and in the wider society, male sexuality becomes entangled with violence. Moreover, the expression of male sexuality through violent means becomes expected and normalised. Through this scene, Bannon guides us to a reading

⁸³ Wittig argues that within heterosexual society, the category of sex differentiates women from men to secure the subordination of women (to men). She argues that in a heterosexual-dominant society, women's bodies are figured as objects for men to possess: 'Being murdered, mutilated, physically and mentally tortured and abused, being raped, being battered and being forced to marry is the fate of women.' Wittig, p.3.

⁸⁴ Bannon, p.30.

⁸⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is not One,' in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, eds. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 79-83.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.25

of Jim's heterosexual behaviour and masculinity that questions the supposed morality of normalised heterosexuality. Ultimately In the dynamics of female passivity and male activity, there can be no sexual equality between partners.

Laura does not see Jim again after her first date with him, thanks to Beth breaking a second date on her behalf. Heterosexual dating expectations do not just originate solely from Laura's roommate (Emily) and her sorority sisters.⁸⁷ Laura's father encourages Laura to get in touch with the son of a family friend, Charlie Ayers.⁸⁸ Though Laura resists finding Charlie, Charlie finds her. After one date, Laura opens up to Charlie about her parents' divorce when he inquires about her father. Bannon establishes that Charlie's motivations in asking her out were purely sympathetic and based on the bond between their fathers. Charlie asks her out on a second date, after giving her a shoulder to cry on: 'Charlie saw her as a nice kid in an emotional jam, and because she seemed to need someone to lean on, because of their families, because she looked forlorn, he thought one more evening wouldn't hurt him.'⁸⁹ Through this passage, Bannon is quick to establish that Laura and Charlie are not sexually interested in one another. Because of Laura's reaction to her date with Jim, this is not unexpected.

The feeling is mutual between Laura and Charlie, though the narrator assures us that 'Laura tried to feel a spark of feminine interest in him, but she couldn't.'⁹⁰ Despite his commercial-grade handsomeness, Laura is not interested in Charlie further than the security

⁸⁷'[Laura] had continued going out; it was expected of her. But not with boys like Jim.' (Bannon 2001, p.36)

⁸⁸ As there is also a Charlie in *Spring Fire*, I will refer to Packer's character as 'Charlie Edmonson' and Bannon's Charlie as 'Charlie.'

⁸⁹ Bannon, p.41.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.47.

Charlie can provide her through masking her homosexual desire.⁹¹ While she ponders her romantic attraction to Beth, Laura understands that her desire for another woman is dangerous to her in her current social environment: 'She needed a man just then as insurance against a dozen ills. Charlie stood for Laura-likes-men, men-like-Laura, everything-is-right-with-Laura-so-look-no-further.'⁹² Because Bannon does not depict any of Laura's other dates, the narrative importance of Laura's hetero-social interactions is focused solely on her interactions and eventual romantic rivalry with Charlie Ayers.

Much like Susan Mitchell, in *Spring Fire*, Laura is aware of some inherent difference within her: that she is not interested in men and that this was 'perfectly normal,' for she finds men to be 'unnecessary to her.'⁹³ From the beginning of the novel, Laura is portrayed as naive in her understanding of her own sexuality:

Laura was a naïve girl, but not a stupid one. She was fuzzily aware of certain extraordinary emotions that were generally frowned upon them too, with no very good notion of what they were or how they happened, and not the remotest thought that they could happen to her. She knew that there were some men who loved men, and some women who loved women, and she thought it a shame that they couldn't be like other people [...] Her own high school crushes had been on girls, but they were all short and uncertain and secret feelings and she would have been profoundly shocked to hear them called homosexual.⁹⁴

In this passage, Bannon manages to illustrate how little was generally known about homosexuality. Bannon chooses to describe Laura's awareness of her 'extraordinary

⁹¹ Laura see's Charlie as the kind of person you would see in a TV advertisement: 'She made a cigarette ad of them, a little TV commercial in which Charlie, in a Tuxedo leaned amourosly over a while clothed table to light the beautiful girl's cigarette [...]' Bannon, p.39.

⁹² Ibid, p.65.

⁹³ Ibid. p.23.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

emotions' in terms of a *fuzziness*, signalling that her awareness of her sexual desires is unfocused and blurred by her self-identified femininity. Moreover, this passage signals the effect that normalised heterosexuality has on knowable homosexual desire.

Laura, like Susan, has experienced homosexual desire in her adolescence, but because of a culture hostile to 'deviant' sexuality, she is not fully aware of what homosexual desire truly means. While Laura is vaguely aware of homosexuality, she (like many other young women in the 1950s including Susan Mitchell) suffers from sexual naivety and misinformation. Though Beth eventually reveals to Laura that their sexual acts with each other are homosexual, she struggles with this knowledge, because she perceives herself as normal (in a social sense):

All afternoon, through her thoughts, the lines of print in her text book, the wandering reveries in her head, slipped in the word "homosexual" [...] She sat up finally and looked at her mental picture of the Landons. They were normal. And then she looked down at herself, and nothing seemed wrong [...] everything was feminine [...] She thought that homosexual women were great strong creatures in slacks and brush cuts and deep voices; unhappy things, standouts in a crowd.⁹⁵

Through this passage, Bannon illustrates the misconception that lesbians are masculine in appearance. Upset by the reality she is in love with another young woman, Laura asserts to herself that she has no desire to 'be a boy' or 'to be like them;' this brings her to question, 'but if I'm a girl, why do I love a girl? [...] there must be something wrong with me.'⁹⁶ Again, Bannon illustrates the negative impact Laura's lack of sexual education has on her sense of self. According to Breines, in the 1950s, 'for modern adolescents, constructing a sexual

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.68.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.69.

identity was a means to construct a personal identity’;⁹⁷ through images in popular media, sexual identity was becoming socially visible and increasingly more acceptable. However what female sexuality *looked* like would have been tied to gender ideals disseminated through popular culture. Thus, when Laura questions her sexual identity, she finds it incompatible with the gender expectations fed to her through advertisements, magazines, and Hollywood film stars. Though Laura is not truly in her adolescence, she is presented as a child-like figure in the beginning in the novel; her emotional vulnerability and socially stunted understanding of human sexuality leave allows for comparisons between her and younger teenagers in the 1950s. Moreover, Bannon shows through the previous passages how Laura equates her gender with her biological sex; moreover, because Laura identifies as a feminine woman, she assumes that her sexuality must adhere to ‘normal’ heterosexuality. Laura’s conditioning to binary thinking, and her association between femininity, the female body, and heteronormativity creates a moment of crisis in how she understands her desire for Beth.

When it comes to Laura’s affection for and attraction to Beth, Bannon makes it apparent that it is a case of ‘love at first sight.’ Socially rigid with her polite behaviour, Laura immediately and silently idolises Beth: ‘Beth seemed like all good things to Laura’s dazzled eyes: sophisticated, a senior, a leader, president of the Student Union, and curiously pretty [...] She wasn’t fashionably pretty, but her beauty was healthy and real and her good nature showed in her face.’⁹⁸ Laura’s devotion to Beth and eagerness to please her is often noted throughout the first chapter, setting up the romantic ‘spark’ between them. As a means of protection, Laura builds up a ‘wall of politeness’ between them, using her ‘good manners.’⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Breines, p.86.

⁹⁸ Bannon, pp.1-2.

⁹⁹ Ibid, pp.6-7.

Moreover Laura seeks to put 'emotional distance between them,' as Bannon foreshadows the ending: 'There was a vague, strange feeling in the younger girl that to get too close to Beth was to worship her, and to worship was to get hurt.'¹⁰⁰ In her depiction of Laura's desire for Beth, Bannon engages in the trope of power relations within romance. According to Chodorow, sexual love 'is a fulcrum of gender identity, of sexual fantasy and desire, of cultural story, of unconscious and conscious feelings and fears about intimacy, dependency, nurturance, destructiveness, power, and powerlessness, body-construction, and even self-construction.'¹⁰¹ In other words, the psychology of love is shaped by a number of internal and external factors, including expectations perpetuated by familial messages, 'fairytales, myths, tales of love, loss, and betrayal, movies, books, and television'; not to mention advertisements and magazines.¹⁰² Thus, we can understand Laura's desire as impacted by heterosexual narratives and the primacy of heterosexual imagery in popular culture. Because Laura's gender identity is deeply entrenched in heteronormative concepts of femininity, Bannon places Laura in the position of the passive (powerless) female partner.

However, homosexual desire is not purely analogous to heterosexual desire. According to Nancy Chodorow, female homosexual desire is thought of as both gendered and familial in nature. If, as Chodorow argues, we view homosexual love relationships 'in gendered terms, then one partner must love according to one gender and the other, presumably, according to the other.'¹⁰³ In the context of *Odd Girl Out*, Bannon imagines Laura into a gendered understanding of sexual politics: Laura has a heightened sense of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.7.

¹⁰¹ Nancy Chodorow, *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p.71.

¹⁰² Ibid, pp.73-74.

¹⁰³ Chodorow, p.81.

preservation when it comes to loving Beth. If we compare Laura's love for Beth to Emily's love for Bud, we can see that Laura is aware that loving another on the terms of heteronormative femininity (female passivity) requires self-sacrifice. When we take into consideration that Emily is eventually socially destroyed by her love for Bud, the emotional walls Laura puts up are an unsurprising act of self-preservation. Additionally, the way in which Western discourse has imagined lesbian sexuality in terms of the bond between mother and child (daughter); claims 'that lesbian relationships replicate mother-daughter patterns, whereas heterosexual women love as they loved their fathers.'¹⁰⁴ Bannon also utilises this maternal configuration in her depiction of Laura's desire for Beth.

Initially, Laura approaches Beth with a cautious and sometimes submissive demeanour: Laura treats Beth with polite, 'faintly masculine courtesy' as a means of distancing herself from Beth. However, by the end of her first day in the sorority, Laura reaches out for Beth from her bunk bed, 'like a little girl expecting a good-night kiss.'¹⁰⁵ The reasoning behind Laura's desire for a kiss may stem from the fact that Beth had spent the day showing her around the sorority house. Beth, taking a maternal role of 'big sister,' inspires and perhaps encourages Laura's desire for affection. Laura, who is dealing with the emotional burden of her parents' divorce, may be seeking comfort from the only person to show her kindness. On the other hand, Bannon's descriptions of Laura's childishness may more aptly reflect her own innocence and naivety about her own sexuality. Unlike Leda's relationship with Susan Mitchell, Beth's relationship with Laura is portrayed as something positive for both of the lovers. As Laura's first love, Beth is ultimately a positive force in the process of Laura's

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Bannon, p.13.

sexual maturity – unlike Bud’s romantic influence on Emily. What is most important is to notice how Laura’s relationship with Beth changes throughout the novel.

Beth is presented as an enigma to Laura and a unique and independent young woman in an environment where young women are expected to conform to the demands of the sorority. Beth’s beauty, confidence, and difference draw Laura in, simultaneously enticing her and repelling her from getting too close. While Beth is expressive, Laura is prudish; Laura is too scared and embarrassed to undress in front of other women, or to discuss lingerie with her new roommates (Beth and Emily). Laura is observably ‘embarrassed and self-conscious’ about changing in front of Emily. With arguably honourable intentions, Emily compliments Laura’s nylon bra, and suggests she get one with padding in it, which only proves to make Laura uncomfortable: ‘Laura’s small breasts bothered her. She would fold her arms over them as much to conceal their presence as to conceal their size. She wished that they were more glamorous, more obviously there.’¹⁰⁶ According to Breines, American popular culture demonstrated a commercial obsession with large breasts.¹⁰⁷ Hence, though Laura is given homosexual identity, her preoccupation with her own body is something shared with heterosexual women. By even suggesting that she get a padded bra, Emily is attempting to connect with her on this level. Therefore, this scene demonstrates that heterosexuality and a preoccupation with body-image are not exclusive to one another; pressure for women to conform to normalised beauty standards are not only a part of heterosexual female existence, but lesbian existence as well. While Laura’s sense of bodily self-esteem is not further explored

¹⁰⁶ Bannon, p.19.

¹⁰⁷ ‘The qualification of measurements in inches –breasts, waist, hips—was the standard way to identify desirable women. Beauty contests used measurements as proof of beauty [...] The fetishization of breasts was a gross parody of women, neither sexual nor romantic, even more bizarre in light of prudishness about sexual intercourse and of dreamy romantic representations of heterosexual relationships.’ Breines, pp.100-101

or developed in *Odd Girl Out*, Laura eventually comes to better understand her sexual self through her romance with Beth.

It isn't until Laura spends the night sharing a bed with Beth, that Laura's erotic desire for Beth comes to fruition.¹⁰⁸ The intimate closeness that Beth and Laura share in the 'velvet dark' keeps Laura awake, leading her to kiss and confess her love to Beth as she sleeps.¹⁰⁹ In the morning, Laura confesses that she had liked Beth 'before' she met her: 'She knew only that from the moment she first saw Beth, nobody else interested her. And from the moment she spoke to her, no one else mattered.'¹¹⁰ It is through this scene that Bannon establishes the child-like attitude Laura has when it comes to loving Beth. Though Beth begins to tease Laura about her crush, Laura is unable to maintain her emotional barriers when Beth admits to returning Laura's feelings: 'she was looking up at Beth like a little girl; like Laura six years old begging for a candy heart.'¹¹¹ Sealing her confession with a kiss, Beth dismisses her like a child: Beth tells Laura to 'scram!' and get ready.¹¹² Again, we see Bannon using the trope of role playing in lesbian romance. Bannon again creates a power dynamic between Beth and Laura. In taking the lead in her romantic relationship with Laura, Beth performs the role of a 'mother-husband' if we are to use gendered and familial terms. Moreover, the positive nature of the Laura-Beth romance is a problematised use of power-dynamics and images of domination and submission in their relationship. While their roles are unstable, Laura's initial

¹⁰⁸ The dormitory situation in the Alpha Beta house has the occupants sharing one large sleeping space, while the assigned rooms are for dressing and studying. However, when 'it's awfully cold in the dorm' (Bannon, p.54), Bannon establishes that is common practice for roommates to use a pull-out sofa bed.

¹⁰⁹ Bannon, pp.57-58.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.61.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.63.

¹¹² Ibid., p.64.

infantilised character places Beth in the role of paedophile; this ultimately contributes to the associations made between lesbian sexuality and sexual predatory behaviour.¹¹³ As in *Spring Fire*, the older woman takes on the role of sexual instigator and sexual corruptor. Unlike Leda, however, the 'threat' Beth poses to heteropatriarchal society comes not through her lesbian desire for Laura, but in her overall character as an outspoken, intellectual young woman.

Despite Bannon's use of Butch/Femme coding in the Laura-Beth Romance, Beth does not completely represent female masculinity; rather, Beth participates in an alternative concept of femininity.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, Laura's image of Beth as the embodiment of feminine achievement leads her to make concessions in her mind: 'But then she thought irresistibly of Beth, and her clean wholesome beauty and her gentleness, and she thought that nothing Beth could do would be wrong. And Beth had kissed her...'¹¹⁵ Through Laura's reasoning, we can see how Laura romanticises Beth, subjecting Beth to her fantasy of female purity. Implicitly, Bannon reveals Laura's logic: if homosexuality is wrong, and Beth can do no wrong, then what she and Beth are doing must not be homosexual. It is through this line of thought that Laura becomes deluded. In other words, Laura is still not fully aware of the nature of her desire, nor the social realities that face her.

It is not until she and Beth discuss their relationship, that Laura becomes fully aware of her sexuality. When Laura protests that she and Beth are not 'queer' based on their appearance, Beth responds, 'we're just as queer as the ones who *look* queer [...] We're doing

¹¹³ That is to say, the relationship contributes to the misconception that homosexuality is connected to the corruption of minors; i.e. older women prey upon younger women and lead them to become homosexual.

¹¹⁴ It is worth noting that in *Journey to a Woman* (1960), Bannon continues Beth's story: Beth eventually leaves her husband and children behind to find Laura in New York. Instead of romantically reuniting with Laura, Beth begins a romance with Beebo Brinker, fulfilling the femme role in the butch/femme dynamic.

¹¹⁵ Bannon, p.69.

the same damn thing.’¹¹⁶ This discussion aids Laura in discovering the truth about her sexuality. Beth additionally assures Laura that while there is nothing ‘dirty or wicked’ about loving another woman, it is ‘illegal’¹¹⁷ because of laws prohibiting homosexual activity in the U.S., and the social sanctions against homosexual behaviour in sororities and universities.¹¹⁸

The effect of Laura’s realisation and Beth’s explanation does not lead Laura to have an open mind about female sexuality. When Emily is caught having sex with Bud, Laura’s comments make it clear that she feels superior to Emily. Laura believes Emily ‘got what she deserved’ for breaking the rules, and is surprised that Beth is so quick to defend her:

“Beth, for heaven’s sake! Emily was caught in bed with a man with no clothes on when she wasn’t supposed to see him at all. She was – she was – making love to him –”

Beth came over to the couch and sat down beside Laura [...] “We’ve made love, Laura”

“But that’s different, Beth. That’s clean. It’s beautiful.” [...]

“A man and a woman are beautiful, too [...].”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.131.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.132.

¹¹⁸ In *We Walk Alone*, Ann Aldrich details the individual sodomy laws in each of the 48 states: ‘Because in the United States laws concerning sex crimes are let to the jurisdiction of the individual states, for the most part, the thing that constitutes the criminal act of sodomy has many interpretations.’ Aldrich, 2006, p.111. Aldrich notes that there are no laws that use the words ‘homosexual,’ ‘homosexuality,’ nor ‘lesbian.’ Aldrich, 2006, p.121. Aldrich also mentions: ‘Robert Caprio believes that there is an “unconscious factor” in the distinction between the legal treatment of male and female homosexuals. He believes that it lies in the fact that the male ego refuses to believe that any woman could possibly secure sexual satisfaction without a man’ Aldrich, 2006, p.123. While there is nothing in the US judicial system to outlaw same sex relationships, the relationship between Beth and Laura is ‘illegal’ in the sense that it is socially unacceptable behaviour. Additionally, due to the age difference between Beth and Laura, Beth could be charged with ‘corruption of a minor’ if their love affair was uncovered.

¹¹⁹ Bannon, p.178-179.

Here we can see that Laura romanticises her relationship with Beth, because heterosexual coitus is not involved (and men are not involved), Laura is elevating female homosexual experience above heterosexual experience. Thus, this passage suggests that much like homosexuality, heterosexuality is held to certain social norms. Moreover, acceptance of human sexuality is not inborn, but taught to individuals through social structures. Or in other words, the prejudice towards human sexuality—namely female homo/heterosexuality in the case of *Odd Girl Out*—is based on socially sanctioned (and taught) hatred and fear. Moreover, through this discussion, Bannon compares the social implications surrounding both the heterosexual and homosexual relationships in her novel. Because it was Emily who caught Beth and Laura ‘making love,’ the two women were temporarily safe from heteropatriarchal wrath, but a sense of dread and doom looms over the couple. From a contemporary perspective, Beth has been given an understanding of human sexuality that transcends the 1950s heteropatriarchal social structure. For Beth, sex is sex, regardless of its participants; love making between two women is no more beautiful or special than heterosexual love making. The effect of this statement works against Laura’s established opinions that ‘making love’ to a man is a ‘dirty’ thing. But for the society around them, all sex outside a heterosexual marriage is morally wrong and unclean. This leads the girls to the conclusion that they must run away from looming persecution.

At this point Bannon gives her reader a comparatively happy ending. While the lovers do not end up together, they are able to look towards a future that promises love and fulfilment. For Laura, it is perhaps an ideal ending. Since Bannon sets up a parent/child and teacher/pupil relationship between the naive virgin, Laura, and the sensual, sophisticated Beth, Laura needs to part from Beth if she is truly able to work out her own sexual identity. For Laura, there is a deep love for Beth that hedges on obsession; for Beth, there is no real

love for Laura until the closing scene, and even then it is only platonic love. On the train platform, a wiser Laura tells her lover: 'Beth, you were meant for a man. Like Charlie. I'm not. I'm not afraid to go, I'm not sorry. It hurts, and I love you —[...] But I wouldn't have the strength to face it if I didn't.'¹²⁰ While Beth's love for Laura is incomplete, it is the only support she has. With this incomplete love, Bannon's ending to the novel promises the reader that Laura will have the strength to move forward and better understand herself. In a way, Bannon leads us to a reading of Laura and Beth's relationship that separates love and sexual desire: Beth showed a sexual desire for Laura, but could not truly love her beyond her desire for sexual closeness. Beth is eventually able to love Laura in a more platonic sense; love born of respect and sentiment. The ending of this book is similar to that of preceding pulps like *Spring Fire*: the female protagonists do not end up together. But unlike Packer's pulp, Bannon does not entirely conform to normative concepts of female sexuality present in the 1950s; while Beth and Laura do not live 'happily ever after,' Bannon does conclude her pulp with the complete denial of lesbian sexuality. While Beth is 'meant for a man,' Laura is able to optimistically gaze into her future, sure that men play no part in her sexuality.

3. Female Bisexuality: Beth's desire for Laura and Charlie

Although Laura Landon's growth into sexual maturity and sexual self-awareness is a key component to *Odd Girl Out's* plot, it is shared by the journey of Beth's sexual and emotional growth. Through the characterisation of Beth Cullison, Bannon succeeds in creating a complex

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.212.

character who stands in opposition to normative gender assumptions in the 1950s. Beth is described as a headstrong and independent young woman:

Beth walked with long, smooth strides. She liked to walk and she walked well, as if she were really enjoying her legs; enjoying the rhythmic cooperation between legs and lungs, crisp weather, space and speed. She had a lusty health that almost intimidated Laura, who was breathless with trying to keep up. And breathless, too, with pleasure at walking beside Beth.¹²¹

Immediately, we can draw upon the similarities between Beth and Susan Mitchell in *Spring Fire*. Unlike Susan Mitchell, however, Beth is described as a feminine and ‘very pretty girl.’¹²² Despite the masculine posture, and assuredness, Beth is also considered to be the epitome of feminine beauty.

What differs between Susan Mitchell and Beth, however, is the assuredness and, I argue, an assuredness in her sexuality. When Laura observes Beth’s interactions with others, it alarms her: ‘It scared her to see someone flirt with authority as Beth did: she expected hallowed rules and traditions to crash down on Beth and crush her, and when they didn’t, she was as surprised as she was relieved.’¹²³ Thus, Beth is presented as a young woman who has confidence in herself, unlike Susan Mitchell, but very much like Leda Taylor. Beth’s confidence perhaps comes from the fact that she is secure in heteronormative society. Her beauty gives her a certain kind of privilege. However, I argue that above her physical appearance, Beth’s intellect and desire to ‘beat herself a path’ between ‘being an out-and-out character’ and being ‘one of the herd’ set her apart from her peers.¹²⁴ While Emily’s identity is dependent

¹²¹ Ibid., p.16.

¹²² Ibid., p.24.

¹²³ Ibid., p.16.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

on her relationship with Bud, and Mary Lou adheres to strict moral codes, Beth is decidedly her own person. For example, in a discussion about Beth, Emily explains to Laura that Beth doesn't date: 'she's told me a thousand times she doesn't want a man who's afraid of her, and if they're all afraid of her, to hell with them.'¹²⁵ Laura blurts out that perhaps, Beth is 'afraid of men.' Emily refutes the notion: 'Lord, she's not afraid of anything [...] It's more the other way around. They're afraid of her. She just needs a good man who doesn't scare easy to get her back on the right track.'¹²⁶ Through the characterisation of Beth, Bannon creates the image of a self-assured and confident young woman; one who is not necessarily interested in the socially sanctioned role of wife and mother.

Moreover, Bannon's depiction of Beth reveals a concept that female desire is more complex than Emily's narrative suggests. Bannon describes Beth as being in tune with her desires:

Beth had, over and above most people, a strongly affectionate nature, a strong curiosity and a strong experimental bent. She would give anything a first try, and morality didn't bother her. Her own was mainly a comfortable hedonism. What she wanted she went after. At the time she met Laura, she wanted to be loved more than anything else.¹²⁷

This 'anxious' desire to be loved is attributed to a lack of affection from her aunt and uncle. In a heteronormative fashion, Beth initially seeks love in men: 'It was the natural thing to do; it was inevitable. For Beth grew up to be a very pretty girl, and when she began looking for a man to satisfy her she found more than one always willing to try.'¹²⁸ Though Beth is described

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.22.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.23.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.p23-24.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.24.

as having lost her virginity at seventeen and having relationships ‘with a long string of boys, mostly college men,’¹²⁹ the language Bannon utilises in describing Beth’s quest for love does not demean her for promiscuity. If anything, Beth’s character is ennobled in Bannon’s description, and simultaneously portrayed as pitiable in her failure to find love and happiness with a man.¹³⁰

In terms of her relationship with Laura, Bannon sets Beth up as the instigator in their relationship. Though Laura’s infatuation with Beth is clear from the beginning and she turns down invitations to parties in favour of regularly seeing films with Beth.¹³¹ Though arguably not sexually motivated, Beth fosters an intimacy between her and Laura, unlike the platonic bond Beth shares with Emily. On an evening when they watch *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Beth takes hold of Laura’s hand in the darkness. For Laura, the experience is described as ‘strange, sweet, and inebriating.’¹³² This then becomes a common occurrence on their film dates: ‘They never mentioned it but after that their hands always found each other in the dark of the theatre.’¹³³

Laura’s passion for Beth quickly becomes obsessive and possessive. Beth, who falls in love with Charlie Ayers after she has been intimate with Laura, is quick to promise never to

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.25.

¹³⁰ ‘It took [Beth] a long time to see that it wasn’t the fault of any of [the men she dated], but rather all of them, and of herself. That was the bitterest pill. And after she confessed to herself that something prevented her from finding the love she so wanted she became rather cynical about it. The bitterness never showed, but it was there. She was just a little contemptuous of men because none of them had been able to satisfy her; it was much more comfortable than being contemptuous of herself for a fault she couldn’t understand.’ (Bannon 2001, p.26)

¹³¹ Ibid., p.44.

¹³² Ibid., p.45.

¹³³ Ibid., p.45.

see Charlie again.¹³⁴ Laura's desire for Beth becomes unnerving through Bannon's description of the turning point in their relationship:

[Laura] had a frightening premonition that Beth would resent her bondage, but at least she couldn't break it: she had forged her own chains. Besides, it was so thrilling to feel Beth bound to her, to feel Beth her captive, that Laura couldn't see the dangers clearly [...] Beth was hers.¹³⁵

Through this description and other instances in the novel, Bannon depicts the twisting of Laura's relationship with Beth. While Laura feels deeply in love with Beth, Beth's love for Charlie makes Laura deeply jealous and possessive of Beth. The preceding passage illustrates the moment in which the relationship between Beth and Laura becomes oppressive for Beth. Instead of a mutual 'binding' and intimacy between the two lovers, Beth becomes tied to Laura. Though it is through her own promises, Beth cannot return Laura's love. However, it is too simplistic to label Laura as a sexual antagonist. Beth also takes advantage of Laura's affections.

Bannon makes it clear that Beth does not feel love for Laura in the same way Laura feels love for Beth. Because Beth is 'open' to find love (sexual gratification and affection) in Laura, she might seem to be a more accepting individual, but she is still governed by societal expectations. In multiple passages, Bannon illustrates how Beth is a sexual opportunist:

Simply because Laura was right there with her in the same place at the same time, because Laura was sweet and warm and accessible and Beth felt a tender fondness for her. And perhaps most of all because Charlie had aroused to painful new life, her old craving for love.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.113.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.114.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p.59.

Here we see that Beth is not only open to Laura's sexual desires, but she fears her own sexual desire for Charlie. Beth is neither disgusted nor fearful of Laura's homoerotic desire, but takes advantage of her love for her own reasons: 'Laura would pour her passion over Beth like Honey – rich and sweet and natural, and yet somehow ensnaring. It was delightful, a balm and succour to Beth, but it wasn't all-engrossing, all-satisfying, as it was for Laura.'¹³⁷ For Beth, Laura eventually becomes a stand-in for her desire for Charlie. Unable to understand her unexpected heterosexual desire for Charlie, Beth transfers that desire onto Laura. Through the one-sided relationship between Beth and Laura, Bannon creates the expectation that the romance between the two college women is temporary. Even Laura and Beth are aware of the finite nature of their relationship.¹³⁸ Ultimately, both young women attempt to take full advantage of the other, but for different reasons.

Though it may be tempting to view Beth's bi-sexuality as an argument for the social acceptance for homosexuality, Bannon manages to involve her character in the Freudian theory of female homosexuality as developmental retardation in women. Through an argument with Laura, Beth chides Laura over her jealousy:

There's a whole world around us, Laura [...] And crying over each other and clinging to each other and denying the rest of the world exists is sure as hell not the way to [live in the world]. That's a child's way, Laura [...] If you're still a child, then go home. Go on back home to your mother and father where you'll be happy. Let *them* worry about you, let *them* take care of you. *I* can't; everything I do is wrong. Well, go back to your happy home and let your parents figure it out [...]

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.75.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.85.

You can't love a girl all your life, Laura. You can't be in love with a girl all your life. Sooner or later you have to grow up.¹³⁹

Though Beth is more sexually accepting than her sorority sisters, she still believes that lesbian sexuality is immature. Because Beth subscribes to this Freudian notion, we cannot consider her as a completely progressive figure. Beth's character simultaneously supports lesbian sexuality and the open expression of female sexuality, while holding to the notion that a lesbian relationship cannot last, nor can it be a part of adult life. At the same time, Beth admits that her sexual relationship with Laura 'awakened' her own sexuality and enabled her relationship with Charlie.

While Beth's sexuality is complicated by her relationship with Laura, it is simultaneously undermined through her relationship with Charlie. It is important here to emphasise how Beth can be viewed as a feminist character when viewed through Laura's perspective. Beth functions as a role-model for Laura, in that she is considered a strong, opinionated woman who tends to intimidate the men she dates. However, Bannon undermines Beth's identity through her relationship with Charlie. When Charlie first meets Beth, he quickly asserts his dominance, taking Beth's hand which is intended for Laura.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, when they sit beside one another, Bannon depicts Charlie as sexually assertive with Beth in a way he was not with Laura:

The pressure of the warm firm hand on her leg exhilarated her and confused her at the same time. It had always taken Beth a while to react to a man [...] But from the moment Charlie's arm had circled her waist she had felt an almost electric delight in him. She almost resented it [...] Charlie had done absolutely nothing to deserve [her affection] except touch her once or twice and talk to her a little [...]

¹³⁹ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 50.

she began to wonder if something was wrong with her...or for the first time, something was right.¹⁴¹

Thus, Bannon gives Charlie the ability to make Beth shy. Not only does his physical size surprise her, but his personality takes on a stereotypically masculine and aggressive attitude in his interactions with Beth: 'He was easy and firm with Beth and she followed him docilely, faintly annoyed with him for attracting her and amused with his confidence.'¹⁴² Though Beth finds herself physically attracted to Charlie, his overtly pronounced dominance over his relationship with Beth is troubling and threatening.¹⁴³

Because Bannon was writing under similar pressures to Vin Packer, Beth's ultimate decision to stay with Charlie at the end of the novel is not surprising. Unlike Packer, however, Bannon was able to work more explicit messages of homosexual acceptance into her novel. In the novel's conclusion Laura maturely assesses her relationship with Beth:

We were in the same place at the same time and we both needed affection, darling. If it hadn't been that way, I wouldn't have known, I wouldn't have learned about myself, maybe not for a long time. And then it could have been a brutal, terrifying lesson. You made it Beautiful, Beth.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p.51.

¹⁴² Ibid., p.79.

¹⁴³ In the physical interactions between Beth and Charlie, Charlie takes aggressive liberties with Beth: 'She sat like that for almost ten minutes until suddenly a strong hand gripped her neck and she put her head back with a jerk, electrified. She Laughed in spite of herself, hunching her shoulders and squirming to be free. Charlie held her firm, grinning down at her (Bannon, p.93). Moreover, Beth views her relationship with Charlie as threatening to her relationship with Laura, and on another level damaging to her reputation: 'Beth was afraid that [Charlie] would read in her eyes something of her concern for Laura; that he would see on her lips the illegal kisses, the extraordinary passion that girl had inspired in her.' Bannon, p. 82.

¹⁴⁴ Bannon, p.210.

While Laura's words to Beth romanticise her sexual awakening—perhaps unlike the experience of Bannon's lesbian readership—they allow Bannon to give her characters a happy (happier) ending. Because of Beth, Laura is better able to understand her own sexuality; and in the same way, Laura enables Beth to understand her own sexual desire and love for Charlie.

For readers of *The Ladder's* LTC, the hopeful ending Bannon gives Laura is a stark departure from the ending given to Susan Mitchell and Leda Taylor in *Spring Fire*. Gene Damon's review of *Odd Girl Out* and the letters supporting Bannon in 'Readers Respond' highlight the ways in which members of *The Ladder's* LTC formed opinions around how lesbian stories were written. It was not simply enough to have access to novels with lesbians represented in them; members of this LTC wanted lesbian protagonists to be written with 'understanding and sympathy.' Moreover, they wanted authors to be a 'friend' to their cause of integration with, education for, and acceptance by 'the public at large.'¹⁴⁵ Lesbian pulps like *Odd Girl Out* (1957) not only provided lesbian readers with 'happier endings,' but enabled readers to engage in discussions about the role of sex and sexuality in 1950s popular discourse, and disseminated critiques of 1950s social norms. Texts like *Odd Girl Out*, while marketed as cheap and disposable entertainment, explicitly engaged in discussions about the limitations placed on female sexuality after World War II and surpass the expectations placed on pulp media at the time and in the present. The members of *The Ladder's* LTC, who read Bannon's 'sympathetic' portrayal of romance, would have also picked up on the subversive messages voiced by Beth in her argument with Laura. Moreover, the representations lesbian experience in Bannon's pulps fostered connections between lesbian readers – these connections are why lesbian pulp fiction has been so aptly named 'survival literature.'

¹⁴⁵ "Purpose of the Daughter of Bilitis," in *The Ladder*, ed. Del Martin, 11.1, (October 1966), 2.

As I have mentioned earlier in the chapter, Bannon's succeeding books take Laura to New York where her journey of self-discovery continues where it left off. Through the remainder of the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, Bannon writes about the love and conflict between Laura and Beebo Brinker. In the next chapter, I will examine Beebo Brinker and her status as a 'butch' throughout Bannon's remaining novels. Through an examination of female masculinity in the lesbian community of the 1950s and 1960s, the following chapter investigates Bannon's representations of 'butch' gender identity and the contradictory praise Bannon received from members of *The Ladder's* LTC. This lofty, yet contradictory praise invites an interrogation of Bannon's characterisation of butch identity.

Chapter Four

Beebo Brinker: Butch Identity in *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*

Looking back from the mid-80s to the distant 50s and 60s, let me share a thought with you. The books as they stand have 50s flaws. They are, in effect, the offspring of their special era, with its biases. But they speak truly of that time and place as I knew it. I would not write them today quite as I wrote them then. But I did write them then, of course. And if Beebo is really there for some of you – and Laura and Beth and the others – it's because I stayed so close to what felt real and right.

– Anne Bannon, epitaph from *Beebo Brinker* (2001)

In an epitaph to the 2001 Cleis Press publication of *Beebo Brinker*, Ann Bannon noted that, while her pulps have their flaws, they were written in and in reaction to a specific time in the United States. Moreover, Bannon touches upon the tangibility of fictional characters, like Beebo Brinker. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Beebo Brinker, the romantic protagonist of the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, did not appear in Bannon's first book of the series. It wasn't until she was urged to continue writing lesbian pulps by her fans that she invented Beebo Brinker. Through four novels, Ann Bannon developed a character that was responsible for the success of five of her six novels.¹ Beebo Brinker was not only significant to

¹ *Odd Girl Out* (1957), *I am a Woman* (1959), *Women in the Shadows* (1959), *Journey to a Woman* (1960), and *Beebo Brinker* (1963). Bannon's success is marked by the repeat publications of the aforementioned pulps and *Odd Girl Out* (1957) first by Niad Press (1983) followed by Cleis Press (2001).

her lesbian readership; for Bannon, Beebo was her 'own unrealised romantic phantom.'² The invention of Beebo Brinker was a personal act for Bannon. In the forward to *I am a Woman* (2001), Bannon writes,

I had just invented Beebo Brinker for [*I Am a Woman*], and with the intensity of youth I imagined her real-life counterpart out there [in New York] somewhere, down in the Village going about her business, while I, on my roof, was trying to capture her story. I spent a fair amount of time leaning on crumbly old parapets, staring deep into the lights and wondering if there were a real Beebo on this planet. If there were, would I ever meet her? Would she be like the woman I had contrived out of sheer need so she would at least exist somewhere in the world, even if only in the pages of my book? Was there anybody like her anywhere? Big, bold, handsome, the quintessential 1950s buccaneer butch, she was a heller and I adored her.³

In short, Beebo became Bannon's idealised image of the butch lesbian. As this chapter will show, Beebo Brinker's fame (or infamy) invites a close reading of Beebo's butch identity and its representation in popular culture. As mentioned in previous chapters, Bannon's books have a lasting place within lesbian popular culture. Bannon not only participated in the 'Golden Age' of lesbian paperback novels, but the multiple republications and an award-winning 2007 stage adaptation of Bannon's novels show the lasting cultural impact her series has had on lesbian cultural production.⁴ In a 1987 interview, when asked about the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, Barbara Grier remarked, 'Everybody remembers Beebo Brinker' noting the lasting iconography of butch women within the wider lesbian community in the United States.

² Ann Bannon, *I am a Woman*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 2002), p.x.

³ Ibid., p.v.

⁴ In 2007, Kate Moira Ryan and Linda S. Chapman adapted three of Bannon's novels into a play for an off-off Broadway production of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*. The Hourglass Group held performances for a month in 2007. After winning a GLAAD Media Award, the play ran again in March 2008.

While Grier found Beebo to be an undesirable person – ‘rude, crude, and violent’ – she also conceded that ‘the butch’ as a visible member of lesbian culture ‘stand[s] out in [...] the way that males with an adventurous streak’ do within mainstream (heterosexual) culture. As Grier argues ‘The dancing cavaliers in life are the ones remembered in literature and art and I think our [lesbian] culture follows that closely.’⁵ It is through this lens that Beebo Brinker must be viewed. Moreover, Grier’s assessment of Beebo’s butchness echoed much of the objections she and other members of *The Ladder’s* LTC felt about butch/femme through the course of the magazine’s publication. Nevertheless, Bannon’s books were viewed favourably by this LTC. Thus Beebo’s character is placed in a contradictory position as a popularised fictional character in *The Ladder’s* textual community. This chapter argues that through her role as a lasting butch icon, is it possible to assess the construction of her narrative.

But why Beebo Brinker? Until *Beebo Brinker* (1963) Beebo is not the primary character in Bannon’s novels. Moreover, in *The Ladder* the series was referred to as the ‘Laura-Beth’ series by Jeannette H Foster in her scathing review of Ann Aldrich’s work.⁶ Nevertheless Bannon’s collected works are named after a character that primarily functions as a love interest for the femme protagonists. In other words, she is primarily imagined in terms of femme desire; through the perspective of Laura Landon in *I am a Woman* (1959) and *Women in the Shadows* (1959), and of Beth Cullison in *Journey to a Woman* (1960). The fact that we see Beebo primarily through the eyes of her femme lovers (until *Beebo Brinker*) in and of itself invites a thorough analysis of femme desire in Bannon’s novels. The stories of Bannon’s

⁵ “LHA Daughters of Bilitis Video Project: Barbara Grier, Tape 2 of 4, November 27, 1987,” Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA, accessed May 3, 2016, <<http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/235>>.

⁶ Foster, p. 8

leading femmes are of equal importance and complexity to Beebo's story.⁷ The main reason for focusing on Beebo, however, are the same reasons Judith Halberstam chose to pursue his research on female masculinity.⁸ Academically and socially, female masculinity has been historically marginalised, ignored, and stigmatised.⁹ As seen through various articles in *The Ladder*, "Butchness" was not always thought of favourably given the visibility and negative connotations associated with butch women in the 1950s and 1960s. In one of the earliest issues, *The Ladder's* DOB President D Griffin responded to a letter that voiced concerns that 'the kids in their fly front pants and with the butch haircut and mannish manner are the worst publicity that we [lesbians] can get.' In Griffin's response, she claims that they have 'converted a few to remember that they are women first and a butch or fem [second], so their attire should be that which society will accept.'¹⁰ Another letter from Marion Zimmer Bradley published in *The Ladder's* first year echoed the sentiments of Griffin: 'I think Lesbians themselves should lessen the public attitudes by confining their differences to their friends

⁷ For example, Laura goes through a turbulent relationship with Beebo, before ultimately marrying Jack Mann, which Julian and Beth ends up leaving her husband and children, having a few affairs, and settling down with Beebo in an assumed happy ending, although not necessarily a permanent one, with Beebo. Julian B Carter analyses both Beth and Laura in his essay: "Gay Marriage and Pulp Fiction: Homonormativity, Disidentification, and Affect in Ann Bannon's Lesbian Novels," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 15, Number 4, (2009), 583-609.

⁸ Jack Halberstam now identifies as male, but at the time of *Female Masculinity's* publication identified as female. For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to Halberstam using 'Judith' because this was the name he used at the time.

⁹ I operate under the view that gender is socially constructed concept. The work of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, and Simone de Beauvoir inform my understanding of gender construction. However, I recognize the power that socially constructed norms place on the individual, specifically when engaging in analysis of 1950s and 1960s popular fiction. For this reason, I will make reference to what Western (American) society has deemed *masculine* and *feminine* to align with the social context in which Bannon's pulps were written and published.

¹⁰ D. Griffin "The President's Message" in *The Ladder*, Vol. 1 No. 2, November 1956, 2-3, p.3.

and not force themselves deliberately upon public notice by deliberate idiosyncrasies of dress and speech.¹¹ At least in the earlier years of the DOB and *The Ladder*, it is clear that staff and readers alike shared the opinion that butchness and the image presented through butch identity was not compatible with social progress.

This chapter will seek to address the following questions: How do Beebo's characteristics conform to and contribute to the stereotypes associated with butch identity? Conversely, in what ways might Beebo resist stereotypes? What does her character implicitly and explicitly suggest about the nature of butch sexuality and desire? How does Beebo's character enact dynamics of butch/femme sexual politics? Through close textual analysis, I will demonstrate how Bannon's fictional character becomes not only a figure of lesbian desire, but a means of addressing the parameters and socially imposed limitations of lesbian existence in the 1950s. This chapter analyses Beebo's characterisation across the series. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the order in which Bannon published her four novels, and in doing so, to note the order in which her initial readers would have read them.¹² In the prequel, *Beebo Brinker*, readers gain new knowledge about Beebo's past, previously unmentioned in the earlier novels. Thus, in reading the novels in a 'chronological' order – as opposed to publication order – the manner in which Beebo is read and understood would be altered. Moreover, *The Ladder's* LTC would have read Bannon's novels in publication order and as they became available through the DOB book service. Yet the popularity of Bannon's

¹¹ Marion Zimmer Bradley, 'Readers Respond,' *The Ladder*, Vol. 1, No 7, May 1957. 20-22, p.21.

¹² On my own first and second readings of her novels, I have done so in order of publication date as a means of preserving the way in which knowledge of Beebo's character was initially communicated to readers in the 1950s and 1960s.

novels and their mostly positive reception by *The Ladder's* LTC seems contradictory to their anti-butch stance.

Additionally, this chapter takes into consideration the reader-reception of Bannon's lesbian audience in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bannon continued her writing of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* after receiving letters from her female readers:

The female readers wrote from little towns all over the country. Such was their isolation that many of them were grateful to me for reassuring them that they were not totally alone in the world. They wanted me to give them advice, and they wanted to meet me. They were sweet, tentative, grateful, scared, and even needier than I, if that's possible, of education and support.¹³

Ideally, these letters Bannon received after publishing *Odd Girl Out* and her subsequent pulps would have granted some additional insight into reader-reception of her books. Sadly, as Bannon has lost the letters in 'one of [her] many moves over the years,'¹⁴ it is impossible to provide precise examples of her female (presumably lesbian) readers' responses to her work. Nevertheless, some responses to her work survive in the pages of *The Ladder*. Thus, it is through the lens of *The Ladder's* textual community in which this chapter addresses the popularity of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* and Beebo's status as a butch icon. Before it is possible to assess Beebo's butchness through her physical appearance and her relationship to her femme lovers, it is important to address butchness and its definition.

¹³ Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, Inc., 2001), p. X

¹⁴ Ibid.

1. Butchness in 1950s and 1960s America

To conduct a close reading of Beebo's character it is vital to attempt to understand the cultural significance of butch identity in the lesbian 'community' of the 1950s and 1960s, and to recognise the debate and changing social status of butch identity over the past forty-five to fifty years. According to Lillian Faderman, America in the 1950s saw the growth of lesbian subculture despite the dangers faced by homosexual men and women in a culture of conformity. As mentioned in the introduction, the cultural climate of the Red Scare and Lavender Scare during the early 1950s was highly restrictive, and anything that deviated from what was deemed socially appropriate would have been seen as suspect and 'Unamerican.' Identities formed around sexuality were foisted on lesbian women by 'powerful creators of social definitions': medical experts and politicians.¹⁵ While female homosexual experience appears earlier in history, according to Faderman, 1950s America was the historical starting point of lesbian community formation in the United States. Moreover, unlike other minority groups in the US, American lesbians in the 1950s had no template or traditions to incorporate into their daily lives as individual lesbians, nor as members of a lesbian community; mid-century American lesbians were 'without a history' and 'without a geography' from which they could centre a sense of collective identity.¹⁶ It is unsurprising then, that the formation of lesbian communities in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in the development of multiple lesbian subcultures. These subcultures differed based on geographic location, but also on age and class. The Daughters of Bilitis and the textual community of *The Ladder*, for example, consisted of middle-class and

¹⁵Faderman, p.159. These 'powerful creators' included Dr. Charles W Socarides, who had a strong influence on popular psychology and featured on the 1967 report, CBS 'The Homosexuals.'

¹⁶ Faderman, pp.160-161.

predominantly white lesbians. In contrast, the women who frequented the gay bars—places DOB members desperately wanted to avoid—were young and working-class lesbians.

Unlike their middle-class counterparts, ‘young and working-class lesbians who had no homes where they could entertain and were welcome nowhere else socially were held in thrall by the bars.’¹⁷ While lesbian bars provided social opportunity for working-class lesbians, patronising a bar came with risks. In *A Restricted Country*, Joan Nestle give an account of her experience at The Sea Colony in Greenwich Village, New York:

Because we lived in the underworld of the Sea Colony, we were surrounded by the nets of the society that hated us and yet wanted our money. Mafia nets, clean-up New York nets, vice-squad nets. We needed the lesbian air of the Sea Colony to breathe the life we could not breathe anywhere else, those of us who wanted to see women dance, make love, wear shirts and pants. Here, and in other bars like this one, we found each other and the space to be a sexually powerful butch-femme community.¹⁸

Nestle’s passage about lesbian bars in New York highlights the risks taken by lesbian women at this time. As mentioned in previous chapters, homosexuality was criminalised and those who were suspected of homosexuality were socially and institutionally ostracised by mainstream America. For white-collar, middle-class homosexual men and women, this meant hiding in plain sight and passing for straight. For working-class lesbians, however, the lesbian bar provided an environment for socialising and meeting potential friends and lovers. In these lesbian underworlds, codified relationships and roles developed through the emergence of butch-femme lesbian relationships. As Faderman rightly argues, there were a multitude of

¹⁷ Ibid, p.162.

¹⁸ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003. P.26

lesbian subcultures located in various urban spaces across the United States; thus it would be incorrect to generalise the unwritten social codes of conduct followed within the various lesbian bar spaces. There most likely would exist differences (albeit subtle differences) in clothing style and etiquette depending on the location of a specific bar (or group of bars). Nevertheless there existed common 'gendered' divisions along the butch-femme dichotomy: butch lesbians appeared and acted masculine; femme lesbians appeared and acted feminine.¹⁹ There would have existed variations within the butch-femme community in terms of masculine/feminine identification and gender expression. As Elizabeth A Smith argues, butch-femme 'was a way for lesbians to express aspects of their sexuality to one another. It should not be assumed, however, that roles were all-defining, that everyone who used them gave them the same meanings, or that they worked equally well for all lesbians.'²⁰ Therefore, is it impossible and ill-advised to strictly or succinctly define butch/fem. Few primary sources survive from which individual experiences of butch identity can be drawn upon in order to derive a definition. According to Elizabeth A. Smith, the reason for this lack of first-hand accounts is largely because lesbians 'who identified as butch or femme were largely working-class women who left no written records.'²¹ Some first-hand accounts do exist through anthologies, studies, and interviews conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, but the limitation of memory places additional restrictions on the ability to accurately define butchness within a 1950s & 1960s context.

¹⁹Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, *Boots of Leather Slippers Of Gold: A History of a Lesbian Community*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993). Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003). *The Persistent Desire*, Ed. Joan Nestle, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc. , 1992).

²⁰ Elizabeth A Smith, 'Butches, Femmes, and Feminists: The Politics of Lesbian Sexuality' in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 3 (Spring, 1989) pp. 398-400

²¹ Ibid, p.399

Even consulting a wide variety of texts on butchness presents challenges. For example, *Dagger: On Butch Women* (1994)—an anthology compiled and edited by Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due—provides definitions of butchness in reaction to Second Wave feminism. In ‘Why I love Butch Women’ Carol A Queen specifically reacts against the limitations placed on lesbian sexual expression by lesbian feminists in the 1970s. The imagery utilised by self-identified butch women in the 1980s and 1990s has a different aesthetic and exists within a different cultural landscape from that utilised by pre-Stonewall butch women. Because of these historical differences, it may initially be anachronistic to rely on 1980s and 1990s butch definitions in application to a 1950s-1960s butch experience, but there may be some cultural constants from which to formulate a working definition for this chapter. For Queen, a self-identified femme, ‘butch’ is “Rebellion against women’s lot, against gender-role imperatives, that pit boyiness against girliness and then assign you-know-who the short straw. Butch is a giant *fuck* YOU! to compulsory femininity, just as lesbianism says the same to compulsory heterosexuality.”²² Moreover, butch is ‘sexual power of a king that no woman is supposed to have.’²³ While this may be a satisfactory and accurate definition of butchness in a post-Second Wave feminist context, the definition is formulated in reaction to the rhetoric of Second Wave feminism that told butch/femme-identified women that their relationships mimicked heterosexist and heteropatriarchal relationship models.²⁴ This was a reaction sought to

²² Carol A Queen, ‘Why I Love Butch Women’ in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, eds. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), p. 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.19.

²⁴ Lilian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Rita La Porte, ‘The Butch-Femme Question’ in *The Persistent Desire*, Ed. Joan Nestle, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1992), 208-219. Jeanne Cordova, ‘Butches, lies, and feminism’ in *The Persistent Desire*, Ed. Joan Nestle, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1992), 272-292. Elizabeth A Smith, “Butches Femmes, and Feminists: The Politics of Sexuality.” *NWSA Journal*, 1.3 (Spring, 1989), 398-421.

reaffirm gender definition within a wider lesbian identity in reaction to lesbian feminists who prescribed androgyny in resistance to oppressive forms of masculinity and femininity. While Queen's definition may be useful in terms of mapping the trajectory of the politicisation of butchness both within and outside the lesbian community, this definition proves initially anachronistic when analysing the popularised image of Beebo in the 1950s.

Inherent in Queen's understanding of butchness is a level of political consciousness that was not often held by butch lesbians in the 1950s. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis examined a lesbian community in Buffalo New York in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. According to Kennedy and Davis, the butch lesbians in Buffalo, New York participated in gender appropriation as a means of self-expression. The 1950s butch 'who dressed in working-class male clothes for as much time as she possibly could,'²⁵ was participating in a silent act of rebellion against normative gender assumptions in the United States at the time. In refusing to 'divide their lives' for work and family, butch lesbians were far more visible than the middle-class femme lesbians, some of whom would later go on to form lesbian separatist groups in the 1970s. While the act of dressing in masculine clothing is viewed as silently and even unconsciously political, this understanding of proto-politicised butchness comes from a late-1980s and 1990s perspective of gender and sexuality. These definitions of butchness are seen through a lens of queer theory that deconstructs the link between gender and sexuality.²⁶ This thesis is in agreement with a Queer perspective of gender and sexuality, however the cultural binding of gender and sexuality that existed in a 1950s and 1960s

²⁵ Kennedy and Davis, p.68.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (London: Routledge, 2007). Judith Halberstam. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

context must be accounted for in formulating a definition of butchness for the analysis of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*.

Through even the briefest examination of Second Wave Feminism, it is clear that there were strong criticisms made of the dynamics of butch-femme relationships. Through reading 'Woman-identified woman' by Radicalesbians and other statements made by lesbian feminists in the 1970s, it can be seen how butch identity, as masculine identity, was considered a mimicry and reinforcement of heteropatriarchal relationship structures within the lesbian community.²⁷ While there existed a strong reaction against butch/femme from the lesbian feminists of the 1970s, anti-butch/femme relationship models stem from what Elizabeth A Smith refers to as an 'anti-sexual lesbian movement' within the ranks of the Daughters of Bilitis and through the pages of *The Ladder*. While *The Ladder* did 'not necessarily reflect the opinion of' the DOB,²⁸ as a publication it had a predominantly white, middle-class bias. Unlike their working-class butch/femme counterparts, middle-class lesbians seemingly were more concerned with the implications facing lesbian visibility and representational politics. In employing an integrationist strategy, many middle class lesbian readers of *The Ladder* (who may or may not have been members of the DOB) aimed to appeal to the conformist culture present in the 1950s. Moreover, the readers' disapproval of butch/femme is apparent through reader and writer contributions to *The Ladder*.

One example of this disapproval comes in the form of a letter from Z.N. of San Leandro California published in October 1958. In this long letter, Z.N. advocated 'making concessions'

²⁷ See Faderman, Smith, Penelope, Innes and Lloyd, Cordova, Laporte, Nestle, and Buarana, Roxxie, and Due.

²⁸ 'Statement of Purpose,' *The Ladder*, 2.3 (January 1958), p.2.

in order to make positive first impressions on heterosexual neighbours and co-workers. Giving her own experience as an example, Z.N. writes.

The twenty happy years my loved one and I have lived together have brought us loyal friends, both homosexual and heterosexual. We have been accepted by heterosexuals and later informed by them that this acceptance, in its initial stage, was based entirely upon appearance and behavior. It gives us a measure of satisfaction to know that, as a couple, we have done something in this way toward establishing a better understanding of the homosexual.²⁹

While ZN does not directly address butch/femme by name, her insistence on 'accepting society' in order to be 'accepted by society' highlight her disapproval of butch/femme subculture. Through her reference to 'dress' and 'behavior' it is clear that ZN, like other *Ladder* contributors and members of the DOB, disapproves of the butch/femme culture. This disapproval of butch/femme subculture divided lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s and highlights the class divide between middle-class and working-class lesbians. In Smith's words, the readers of *The Ladder* 'were white, well-educated, and white-collar of professional, and their median income was three times the national average for income-earning white women. The women who read the ladder were economically and demographically atypical of women and presumably of lesbians, although they were similar to DOB members.'³⁰ While the atypical middle-class lesbians of the DOB may not have participated in the butch/femme subculture of working-class lesbians, butch/femme relationship models seem to have been a topic of many DOB meetings.³¹ According to Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin in a 1987 interview,³²

²⁹ 'Readers Respond' *The Ladder*, 3.1, (October 1958), p.30.

³⁰ Smith, p.401.

³¹ As mentioned in Chapter One, the DOB formed out of the desire to socialise outside of lesbian bar space.

³² Manuela Soares, "Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon, Tape 1 of 4, May 9, 1987," *Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA*, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/716>.

butch/femme was discussed at many of the 'Gab N Java' sessions. It thus appears that butch/femme and the visibility of butch lesbians was a constant topic of discussion for the Daughters of Bilitis and the overlapping textual community of *The Ladder*. Thus, there exists a paradox between the middle-class ideology of the DOB and *The Ladder*, and the popularity of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, which depict butch/femme relationships and working-class lesbian bar spaces. It is seemingly contradictory, then, that the textual community – publicly at least –disapproved of butchness and butch/femme relationships, while their reading habits suggest otherwise: why would a group of presumably middle-class lesbians find the works of Ann Bannon so agreeable as to positively review and recommend a series of pulp novels which rely on butch/femme relationship models to propel the romantic plot? It may be impossible to reconcile the contradictions which appear in this textual community. Nevertheless, what is understood from this contradiction is that the readers and reviewers had varied tastes. As mentioned in chapter one, the variety of literature discussed highlights how members of *The Ladder's* textual community engaged with a variety of reading materials: academic and non-academic; high culture and low culture. There was room in the textual community's literary repertoire for romance fiction and for relationship models that they outwardly objected to as a group.

But what precisely did they find so disagreeable about butch/femme and the lesbian bar space butch/femme women occupied? Specifically, what was butchness and why did middle-class lesbians find it so threatening and fascinating about butch identity? In 'Are Butch and Fem Working-Class and Antifeminist?' (2001) Sara L. Crawley notes the differing definitions of butchness: butch as gender, butch as sexuality, and butch as sexual/romantic

role performance. Through a sociological survey, Crawley suggests that butch/femme served three functions:

- 1) As individuals' intrapersonal understanding of gender that is formed within the context of a dominant, patriarchal society in which dichotomous sex roles are stringently taught.
- 2) As a style that allows public identification of one's lesbianism to other lesbians and to mainstream society to strengthen the existence of lesbian communities (i.e., as forms of visibility and political agency).
- 3) As structures for scripting intimate relationships within lesbian couples.³³

Noting the potential oversimplification of butch/femme in her criteria of butch/femme Crawley provides these categories as a methodological tool in considering the sociological function of butch/femme in lesbian communities.³⁴ Aside from Crawley's inclusion of political agency in her analysis of butch/femme origins, this chapter uses her criteria to contextualise the function of butch/femme within the lesbian subculture of the 1950s and 1960s. While Crawley's methodology is academically helpful as a conceptual frame-work of butch/femme, it does not provide specifics about butch/femme. However, non-academic anthologies and first-hand experiences can provide certain insights into butch/femme identity that are otherwise un-explored through academic study.

One example of lived experience is Merrill Mushroom's 'How the butch does it: 1959.' In her contribution to *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992), Mushroom provides a representation of butchness within the privacy of her home – the detailed process of an imagined butch combing her hair into a pompadour – and within a lesbian bar space,

³³ Sara L Crawley, 'Are Butch and Fem Working-Class and Antifeminist?' in *Gender and Society*, 15. 2 (April 2001), 175-196, p.192.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 194; see note 8 of chapter four.

playing pool. Mushroom's prose piece focuses on the attention the imagined butch pays to her appearance at home, and to the performance of her butchness through the act of publically combing her hair in the bar space. The public act of hair-combing is reminiscent of the working-class 'greaser' youth subculture of the 1950s. In referring to the butch's 'pompadour' and 'duck's ass' hairstyle, Mushroom invokes 'greaser' confidence in her description of 'how the butch does it.' For Mushroom, the butch is self-satisfied in her appearance and performance of her identity through hair combing and playing pool: 'The butch is sultry. The butch is arrogant. The butch is tough.'³⁵ In this singular imagination of butch embodiment, Mushroom provides a colourful description of a version of butchness present in the late 1950s lesbian bar culture. However, not all personal accounts of butchness are as positive and affirming as Mushroom's prose.

Also included in *The Persistent Desire* is Rita Laporte's essay, 'The butch-femme question,' which originally appeared in *The Ladder* in 1971. Laporte defines: 'A butch is simply a lesbian who finds herself attracted to and complemented by a lesbian more feminine than she, whether this butch is only slightly more masculine than feminine.'³⁶ Laporte writes from a perspective contemporary of the 1970s onset of Second Wave feminism, and is additionally involved with the textual community of *The Ladder* towards the end of the magazine's run. While Laporte attempts to defend butch/femme relationships against the criticism that they mirror heterosexual sex roles, Laporte has a negative opinion of lesbian bar culture:

³⁵ Merrill Mushroom, 'How the butch does it: 1959' in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc. 1992), 133-137. 'She trusts she looks wonderful, that her hair is impeccably in place, perfectly styled. She is satisfied with her performance.' Mushroom, p. 135. 'She does not smile, but she is very pleased with her performance.' Mushroom, p.137.

³⁶ Laporte, p.211.

The “bar scene” tends to have considerable consistency from city to city. Its habitués come for the most part from the lower socioeconomic stratum, and it is here that the butch-femme phenomenon is played out in its crudest form [...] It is here that one encounters a genuine copying of heterosexual sex roles. The butches are not simply more masculine women; they imitate males at their worst.

An elaborate game is played where, if a strange butch happened to smile or say hello to another’s chick, she is apt to get slugged in the best barroom brawl tradition. Chicks are strictly property. Being small of stature myself, I would prefer the relative safety of a waterfront sailor’s bar to the toughest of lesbian bars. But fortunately most lesbian bars offer no such danger, but they do exhibit much of the less brutal male-female, dominance-submission behavior, exactly the kind of behavior feminists loathe.³⁷

Through this passage in Laporte’s essay, the negative view of the bar scene is clear. Unlike Mushroom’s positive portrayal of butchness and Nestle’s nostalgic account of The Sea Colony, Laporte represents butchness within the bar space as problematic. Laporte views the lesbian bar as the location where female masculinity has ‘gone wrong’ in its imitation of misogynistic behaviours of mainstream masculinity. Laporte’s commentary, which was originally published in *The Ladder* additionally perpetuates the stereotypes that surrounded lesbian bar culture. Moreover, Laporte dismisses butch women and their gender identity by claiming that butch women ‘imitate males at their worst.’ The rhetoric utilised by Laporte is aligned with 1970s, Second Wave feminism and participates in the dismissal of butch identity as an ‘authentic’ identity. This Second Wave assessment of butchness is highly problematic, markedly because it inherently carries a class bias against working-class lesbians. To borrow Jeanne Cordova’s words, ‘Feminism tore apart [...] butch identity’ in that Second Wave feminism and Lesbian-

³⁷ Ibid. p.209. Laporte’s analysis of butch desire is limiting however, as it does not account for butch-butth sexual desire.

Feminists ‘only analysis of “butch” was synonymous with “male”—which meant thoroughly politically incorrect.’³⁸ Thus, the rhetoric utilised by Laporte can be viewed as classist and dismissive of butch modes of gender identification. Laporte’s account of the lesbian bar space is not the only existing negative account.

In *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory* (1992), Julia Penelope details her personal relationship with her own butch identity. Through self-reflection, Penelope illustrates the controversy over the butch identity.³⁹ For Penelope, the revival of butch self-identification in the 1980s and 1990s is problematic due to the cultural resonance inherent in the various butch identifiers present in the 1950s and 1960s. Penelope’s own experience with her butch role was problematic, and she finds the role she filled in her relationships to be *damaging* and *limiting* to her sense of self.⁴⁰ In her experience, the butch/femme dichotomy caused a rift in the lesbian communities of the 1950s and 1960s: ‘our “community” was fragmented by the [gender] assumptions we learned with the roles we adopted. I didn’t have any femme friends that I can remember, and I know that I had a lot of butch friends.’⁴¹ While I agree with the Second Wave feminist theory that heteropatriarchal relationship models are problematic and oppressive, I do not agree that there is something inherent in butch identity (and female masculinity) that makes it inauthentic or problematic as a mode of self-identification.

³⁸ Cordova, p.283.

³⁹ In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam details this point of contention in the lesbian community during the 1990s: ‘Within a lesbian context, female masculinity has been situated as the place where patriarchy goes to work on the female psyche.’ Halberstam, p.9.

⁴⁰ Julia Penelope *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory*, (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1992), pp.1-3

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.2. I must note here that it is dangerous and limiting to take the experience of one person as a means of generalising the experience of an entire group. Just as Penelope found her experience as a butch to be limiting, it is possible that others found their experiences liberating.

As much as Penelope and others found their butch roles to be limiting, the denigration and disapproval of butch identity is similarly problematic. While Second Wave feminism made many contributions to gender theory, the idea that a bio-sex female should conform to redefined values of womanhood is also limiting. In 'Butch Lesbians and Desire' Kristiina Jalas notes the limiting position of Second Wave feminist values of female identity formation (within a lesbian context):

Feminism also seeks to revalue 'femininity,' often understood as weakness, passivity, and powerlessness, and so by extension to revalue women in a society in which men are portrayed as more powerful beings and 'masculinity' is more desirable [...] While [...] feminist strategies [...] are highly significant and influential, butch identity battles seem to differ by insisting on the value of visibly and deeply invested 'masculinity' in women, where butches distance themselves from the gender binary in particular ways.⁴²

It must also be said that each individual's experience with identity formation is very personal and is based on multiple influences throughout the duration of an individual's life. Thus, Second Wave feminism, albeit inadvertently, participates in the policing of gender identity. According to Sandra Bartky, while the signifiers of masculinity and femininity are in flux, 'The categories of masculinity and femininity do more than assist the construction of personal identities; they are critical in our informal social ontology.'⁴³ In other words, masculinity and femininity, as they are contextualised within a social sphere add meaning to an individual's sense of self. Thus denying butch women access to masculine identifiers (clothing and bodily

⁴² Kristiina Jalas, 'Butch Lesbians and Desire' in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16. 1, (2005), 52-72, p.54.

⁴³ Sandra Bartky 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power' in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior* ed. Rose Weitz, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.29 & p.41-42.

actions), restricts the expression of their self-identification. As much as there is an impetus to re-value (and even re-define) femininity within a western context, if we do not re-value (and re-define) masculinity alongside it, we will only re-form gender hierarchies.

The significance of butch identity and female masculinity in western culture should not be over-looked. As Bartky argues, 'Masculinity, of course is what we make it; it has important relations to maleness, increasingly interesting relations to transsexual maleness, and a historical debt to lesbian butchness.'⁴⁴ As we understand masculinity today, there are multiple sub-categories within the larger framework of masculinity. Moreover, there are multiple categories of female masculinity. This makes the adoption of precise definitions of masculinity elusive and potentially (dangerously) oppressive regardless of the anatomical sex of a masculine individual. For the purposes of this chapter, Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) is particularly helpful in contextualising what masculinity means in an American context. According to Halberstam, concepts of masculinity within popular American and Western ideology

[...] conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege.⁴⁵

Masculinity within a mainstream American context, and especially in the 1950s, was considered ideologically synonymous with whiteness, and middle class economic power. Butchness, on the other hand, participated in the deconstruction of mainstream masculinity

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.44.

⁴⁵ Halberstam, p.2.

and a re-evaluation of masculinity's meaning in its relation to class, race, sexuality and gender. As Innes and Lloyd argue, 'Masculinity, in short, is a set of signs that connote maleness within a given cultural moment, and masculinity is as fluid and changing as the society defining it [...] Class, race, ethnicity, and geography all shape how masculinity is perceived.'⁴⁶ This makes the analysis of butchness and the degree of masculinity incorporated into butch identity formation ideologically tricky. There is ultimately no one stable definition of butchness or masculinity that can be settled upon. All that can be defined about butch identity is that the masculine identifiers that a butch woman chooses in the expression of her butchness will make reference to modes of masculinity that resonate with her sense of self. In other words, how one butch woman chooses to express her female masculinity will not be identical to the gender expression of other butch women.

With the combination of Crawley's academic definition of butch/femme and non-academic descriptions of butchness through works like Mushroom's, there emerges a multidimensional understanding not only of the function of butchness in the 1950s and 1960s, but the emotional and aesthetic expression of butchness as a gender and sexuality.

2. Beebo's Body and Clothing: Imagined Butchness and Gender Performance

In the June 1957 issue of *The Ladder*, Barbara Stephens writes on the subject of female transvestitism and its increasing 'prevalence' in western society.⁴⁷ In her opening statements Stephens comments, 'Dress not only affects one's own personality but also the way that

⁴⁶ Inness and Lloyd, p.185.

⁴⁷ Barbara Stephens, 'Transvestitism: A Cross-Cultural Survey' in *The Ladder*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (June 1957), 10-14.

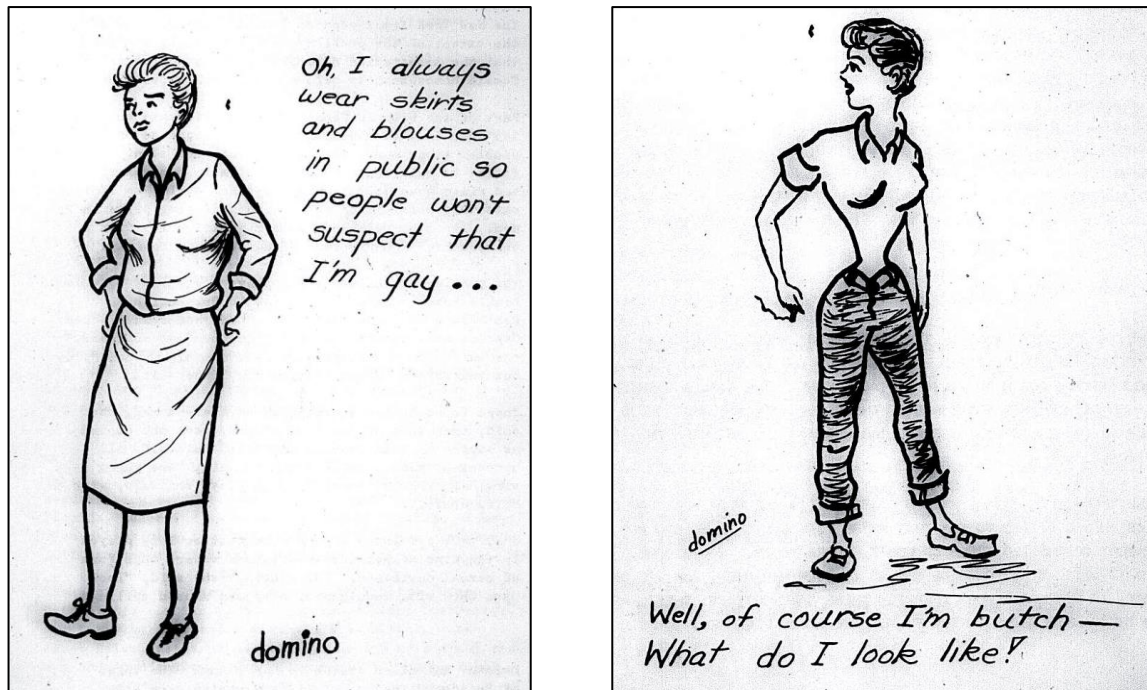


Figure 4.1 and 4.2 - Comics by 'Domino' discussing butchness published in *The Ladder* left: February 1962; right: April 1962

others react to you. There is not a single society existing that doesn't use dress as an identifying symbol.⁴⁸ Articles on the subject of transvestitism and the importance of dress and appearance frequented the pages of *The Ladder*. Moreover, comics by Domino (See Figure 4.1-2) illustrate not only the importance of dress as modes of identification, but the controversy surrounding the ways butch lesbians presented themselves in the 1950s and 1960s. The comic on the left, showing a woman with cropped hair is depicted as unconvincingly feminine. The figure, read as a butch woman in feminine clothing, does not pass. Her body language adds an air of sarcasm to her speech: 'Oh, I always wear skirts and blouses in public so people won't suspect I'm gay...' The humour lies in the dissonance between her statement and her appearance. She wears women's clothing, but has a

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.10.

drastically different posture and silhouette to the figure in the comic published two months later. The woman here wears trousers and exclaims that she is butch despite her hour-glass waist.

Through the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, Anne Bannon portrays Beebo's character across different stages in her life: in *Beebo Brinker*, Beebo is an impressionable seventeen-year-old, fresh from a Wisconsin farm town;⁴⁹ in *I am a Woman* and *Women in the Shadows*, Beebo is in her early/mid-thirties⁵⁰; and in *Journey to a Woman*, Beebo is portrayed as being in her early forties.⁵¹ Across the span of Beebo's twenty-year story, she is consistently described as masculine in appearance. As discussed in the following section, Beebo's physical body and masculine attire lead others to believe she is male. Additionally, Bannon extensively described Beebo's appearance in terms of her body, her face, and her eyes. Through descriptions of these three aspects of Beebo's physical form, Bannon *continuously* emphasises Beebo's 'shockingly boyish' appearance.⁵²

Beebo's post-pubescent body is consistently described in terms of how strong it is. In a description of young Beebo, Bannon emphasises Beebo's 'broad shoulders,' and the fact

⁴⁹ Ann Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ Beebo's age in these two novels is never explicitly mentioned. I have deduced her age to be in her thirties, based on the clues given in *Journey to a Woman*. When Beth eventually reunites with Laura, Laura and Jack's daughter is six-years-old. Because Laura is newly pregnant at the end of *Women in the Shadows*, this means that approximately seven years' time passes between the novels. Because Beebo is described as 'in her early forties' in *Journey to a Woman*, we can deduce an approximate age for Beebo. Additionally, we can assume that Laura is between eighteen and twenty in *I am a Woman* and *Women in the Shadows*, given that Laura dropped out from her first years of university to travel to New York in the end of *Odd Girl Out*. Therefore, there is *at least* ten years of age difference between Beebo and Laura.

⁵¹ Ann Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), p.148.

⁵² Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, p.38.

that Beebo had ‘hardly a hint of a bosom.’⁵³ Bannon continuously pays attention to Beebo’s body in her novels. For example, in the opening chapter of *Women in the Shadows*, Bannon writes, ‘Beebo was a big girl, big-boned and good looking, like a boy in early adolescence.’⁵⁴ Even the older Beebo, is described in terms of her *boyishness*. In *Journey to a Woman*, Bannon describes the moment when Beth sees Beebo for the first time:

[Beth] noticed, out of the corner of her eye, the entrance of a woman whose face and manner captured her interest entirely. She was big, nearly six feet tall, wearing slacks and a man-cut jacket. She was a little over her best weight but strikingly handsome with the black and white hair, still mostly black—curling closely around her head, and light eyes. She walked with a slight swagger, her hands thrust into her pockets of her pants, and Beth wasn’t the only one who turned to look at her as she made her way up to the bar.⁵⁵

This passage, like in other passages describing Beebo, illustrates the emphasis Bannon has placed on Beebo’s appearance. Through the use of adjectives like ‘handsome,’ ‘big-boned,’ and ‘boyish,’ Bannon situates Beebo’s physical appearance in terms of masculine identifiers. Later in the scene describing Beth and Beebo’s first meeting, Bannon continues her description of Beebo’s boyish appearance: ‘still in her early forties, looked like a college boy – gray-haired to some extent, but still collegiate.’⁵⁶ It isn’t until *Beebo Brinker* that Bannon gives Beebo the narrative space to interpret her own body. When Beebo first arrives in New York, she is seen through the eyes of Jack Mann. Jack observes that as a young woman in a big city, Beebo is a target for a ‘smooth operator’ looking to take advantage of her.⁵⁷ However,

⁵³ Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, p.21

⁵⁴ Ann Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 2001), p.8.

⁵⁵ Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, p.146.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.151

⁵⁷ Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, pp.3-4.

Beebo's understanding of herself, albeit naive, gives her the confidence to travel to New York alone. Bannon writes: Beebo 'felt unassailable in the fortress of her flat-chested, muscular young body. It was not the stuff that male dreams were made of.'⁵⁸ Whenever Bannon describes Beebo's body it is described in terms of its masculinity or boyishness, but her body is inherently held against gendered ideals of what male and female bodies *should* look like.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the stereotype of the lesbian who physically appears more masculine than feminine was based upon Havelock Ellis's theory of *inversion* to explain homosexuality. Literary figures like Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness* followed this theory even though it failed to explain the existence of feminine lesbians. Inversion theory is based on generalised notions of the physicality of male and female bodies. In Bartky's critique of the female beauty industry there is an overwhelming pressure placed on women to be small and take up less space: 'massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman's body is met with distaste.'⁵⁹ Immense social power is given to gender assumptions of the male and female ideal. As Halberstam argues,

We could say that the failure of 'male' and 'female' to exhaust the field of gender variation actually ensures the continued dominance of these terms. Precisely because virtually nobody fits the definitions of male and female, the categories gain power and currency from their impossibility. In other words, the very flexibility and elasticity of the terms 'man' and 'woman' ensures their longevity.⁶⁰

What then is the effect of referring to a butch woman in terms reserved for bio-sex males? More specifically, in referring to Beebo as 'boy' even in her early forties, Bannon's description may infantilise Beebo; or at least marks her as 'not female': neither 'man' nor 'woman' in

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.32.

⁵⁹ Bartkey, p.28

⁶⁰ Halberstam, p.27

1950s and 1960s terms. Initial interpretations lead to the assumption that Bannon's impressions of butch bodies reinforce the stereotypes set forth by Ellis' *inverts* and Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon. This would certainly appear to be the case with *I Am a Woman* and *Women in the Shadows* for Beebo is the only butch character described in the novel. However, in *Journey to a Woman*, Bannon provides a description of Billie, another butch woman, whose appearance contrasts with Beebo's male-like body. On Beth's first visit to a lesbian bar, she is introduced to Billie. Unlike Beebo, Billie is described as 'extremely pretty; very small and dainty looking.' Billie is made to wear a skirt for her job as a waitress but is identified as butch through her 'cropped hair and a decidedly aggressive swing in her walk.'⁶¹ Thus, Bannon illustrates some variation in the bodies of butch women in her series. While Beebo may represent an idealised image of physical butchness, her depiction of Billie – albeit brief – suggests that butchness is not solely grounded by a physical body-type, but is communicated through body language and style choice.

In *I am a Woman*, Laura Landon (the femme to Beebo's butch), struggles with her gender and sexual identity because she has fallen for her heterosexual housemate, Marcie. The young woman, who adamantly asserts her femininity in *Odd Girl Out*, suddenly finds herself taking on masculine behaviours, including the act of wearing trousers. While Laura asserts that she is a girl, Jack Mann points out that with Marcie, Laura behaves like a boy and teasingly encourages her to change her appearance to become a butch:

You're too literal, Laura. Cut off your hair. Wear those pants you look so nice in. Get some desert boots, a car coat and some men's shirts, and you're in Business [...] you feel good in pants. You swagger.⁶²

⁶¹ Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, p.118.

⁶² Bannon, *I am a Woman*, p.67.

What the conversation between Laura and Jack points out, is that appearance is one aspect of creating butch gender identity. In other words, Laura has the opportunity to don the mantle (quite literally) of butch identity. By putting on a pair of trousers, Laura gains access to masculine demeanours; through masculine attire, Laura can *swagger*. Ultimately, the clothing worn by the characters in *The Beebo Brinker* Chronicles are not only a means to engage in gender performance; but the ways in which the individual confidence, and changing behaviour of the characters is achieved. Throughout Bannon's novels, special attention is paid to what the characters wear and what their sexual and romantic partners wear. Specifically, Bannon heavily details what Beebo is wearing.

Throughout Bannon's novels, we learn that Beebo has taken her choice of attire very seriously. Her choice of clothing even influences her choice of employment. In *I am a Woman*, we learn that Beebo works as an elevator operator so she 'doesn't have to wear a skirt.'⁶³ In *Women in the Shadows*, Bannon reiterates this knowledge:

She took odd jobs where she could, anything that would let her wear pants.
And she ended up running an elevator and wearing a blue uniform with gold trim.
She had been there for over ten years.

The manager took her for "one of those queers, but perfectly harmless." But he meant a *male* homosexual, to Beebo's endless hilarity.⁶⁴

Through this information, we also learn that Beebo takes great pleasure in her masculine appearance, revelling in the fact that she is often mistaken for a teenage boy. It isn't until *Beebo Brinker*, that we fully understand the extent of Beebo's proclivity for men's clothing. As a part of a series of confessions Beebo tells Jack Mann about the reason she had to leave

⁶³ Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, p.178.

⁶⁴ Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, p.9.

her rural home in Wisconsin. Bannon details the story of how Beebo took her brother's clothes so she could pass as a boy:

I knew it was dangerous, but suddenly it was so irresistible. Maybe I just wanted to get away with it. Maybe it was the feel of a man's clothes on my back, or a simple case of jealousy. Anyway, I played sick at dinnertime, and stayed in the hotel until they left [...] it was as though I had a fever. The minute I was alone I put Jim's things on. I slung Dad's German camera over my shoulder and took his *Farm Journal* press pass. On the way over, I stopped for a real man's haircut. The barber never said a word. Just took my money and stared. [...] I guess I took pictures for almost three hours ... Just wandered around, kidding the girls on horseback and keeping clear of the Wisconsin People.⁶⁵

Through this confession, Bannon reveals the full extent of Beebo's desire to appear as a boy. In both passages Beebo's narrative describes the experience of a woman *passing* as a man. While passing is often theorised in terms of racial passing, there is much to be said on the functions of gender passing.⁶⁶ There are several instances of females passing as males in history.⁶⁷ As little documentation on these individuals survived, save for the most famous

⁶⁵ Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, p.54.

⁶⁶ In an American context, the act of 'passing' has many racial connotations. For example, some mixed-race slaves were able to pass in white society, virtually unnoticed. There are also instances of Jewish Americans passing as 'gentiles' in the United States and as a means of survival in Nazi Germany. In such cases, the act of passing was an attempt to gain better social standing within a society where being 'non-white' was to be considered 'less.' Allison Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in America*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014); Catherine Rottenberg, *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature*, (London: Dartmouth College Press, 2008).

⁶⁷ One of the few articles on passing in *The Ladder's* February 1959 issue discusses transvestitism as a tool used by women who chose to live their lives as men. The article concludes: 'Since 1900 the practice of total transvestitism in women appears to be waning, probably because of the greater license allowed in ordinary feminine dress coupled with broader occupational opportunities for women. Probably no authority will ever conclusively determine the reasons for sex disguise beyond those cases compelled by overt homosexuality'

cases, it would be incorrect to generalise about the gender identity of such individuals. In other words, it would be impossible to determine that these females were either transgender men, or lesbians seeking access to same-sex partnerships. Nevertheless, the ability to pass as men would have afforded these individuals access to male power.⁶⁸ According to Halberstam, 'Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully; at various moments, the successful pass may cohere into something akin to identity. At such a moment, the passer has *become*.'⁶⁹ In more simple terms, for Robin Maltz, 'to pass effectively, a subject is (mis)read as "real."'⁷⁰ Thus, the ability to pass successfully is viewer-directed; in Beebo's experiences, her boss reads her as male and thus she becomes a 'real' male in his eyes. Likewise, the attendants at the Chicago livestock exhibition read Beebo as a young male photographer. Her temporary identity is validated by the interpretation of others: for example, Beebo is assumed to be a member of the 'working press' by a blonde female usher, and she agrees to this identity because 'it sounded important.'⁷¹

According to Maltz and Halberstam, unlike female-to-male transgender men, butch women usually do not seek masculine identification to be read as male. In her discussion of stone butch women Maltz argues, 'stone butches embrace masculinity but not maleness, constantly performing masculinity, but do not valorise manhood; they enjoy passing

(p.13). From Gene Damon and Lee Stuart, 'Transvestitism in Women', *The Ladder*, ed. Phyllis Lyon, 3.5, (February 1959), 11-13.

⁶⁸ This is analogous to the way in which passing as white affords minorities access to racial privilege in western societies.

⁶⁹ Halberstam, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Robin Maltz, 'Real Butch: The Performance/Performativity of male impersonation, drag kings, and stone butch realness.' In *Journal of Gender Studies*, 7.3 (1988), 273-286, p.277.

⁷¹ Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, p.53.

unwittingly or momentarily but would not consider passing as a lifestyle.’⁷² While Beebo may not be a stone butch, her experiences with passing align with Maltz’s argument. Beebo’s desire for masculine clothing does not indicate that she desires maleness. The ‘moment of glory’ she experiences at the livestock exhibition involves flirting with young women, and her assumed identity as a young male journalist grants her access to the ability to flirt publicly and without scrutiny. Similarly, her boss’ misreading of her biological sex is something Beebo is amused by; she takes *enjoyment* from her inadvertent passing as a gay male. Thus, the imagined experience of Beebo’s moment of passing aligns with Maltz’s and Halbertsam’s assessments of (stone) butch passing in lived experiences. Beebo passes as male but does not desire to be one; Beebo’s butch masculinity is enacted or performed through her ‘male’ attire which enables her to *swagger* with confidence.

While Beebo predominantly wears masculine clothing, the occasions in which she is depicted wearing feminine clothing (skirts and dresses) add to our understanding of the power Beebo and Bannon have given to Beebo’s masculine attire. Beebo wears a dress/skirt on three occasions in *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*. In *Beebo Brinker*, the 17-year-old Beebo wears a skirt when she arrives in New York: ‘Beebo sat down a few feet from [Jack] on the floor, pulling her skirt primly over her knees. She seemed awkward in it, like a girl reared in jeans or jodhpurs.’⁷³ Here, Bannon emphasises the mis-match between Beebo’s attire and her

⁷² According to Halberstam, stone butch women self-define ‘as non-feminine, sexually untouchable female.’ Halmerstam, p.21. In the context of the 1950s and 1960s, Julia Penelope recalls her experience as a young butch woman. In Penelope’s social circle, butch women were expected to be ‘untouchable’ below the waist, and if a butch woman allowed another woman to touch her, she would be accused of ‘going femme’ for letting another woman ‘flip’ her, pp.8-9. I cannot argue here that Beebo’s butchness strictly follows these categorisations, nor that Beebo is specifically a ‘stone butch,’ for all the sex scenes in the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* are described in vague terms and from the perspective of Beebo’s femme lovers.

⁷³ Ibid, p.10.

body. While she attempts to ‘primly’ adhere to 1950s gender norms by wearing a skirt, her body appears unnatural in feminine attire. The reference to jeans and jodhpurs connotes a ‘tomboy’ upbringing in a rural environment. According to Halberstam, ‘tomboyism seems to be associated with a “natural” desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys.’⁷⁴ As independent and self-motivated girls, tomboys are often encouraged in their boyishness, but are punished by society ‘when it appears to be the sign of extreme identification.’⁷⁵ Given Halberstam’s assessment of tomboys, Beebo’s awkwardness in a skirt and her attempts at propriety in Jack’s presence indicate that Beebo is punishing herself. Having disgraced her family by dressing as a boy, she felt the need to run away to New York. While moving to an urban space is a commonly used trope in queer narratives, Beebo—at least initially—is not running to the city to access her masculine identity. Instead, Beebo’s move to the city can be interpreted as an attempt to conform to socially prescribed femininity without the weight of past transgressions on her shoulders. It is not only her dress, but her attempt at behaving in a lady-like way that indicates her self-punishment. Despite her best efforts, however, Beebo’s natural masculinity is not easily hidden under thinly veiled attempts at femininity.

Beebo’s awkward appearance in a dress is further emphasised in *Women in the Shadows*, when she takes Laura shopping for a new dress; Beebo’s normally flirtatious behaviour is ‘subdued perhaps by her plain black dress.’⁷⁶ Perhaps the most striking reaction to Beebo (in women’s clothing) is through Laura’s perspective in *I am a Woman*. Bannon writes:

⁷⁴ Halberstam, p.6

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, p.29.

Laura was stunned. It was pathetic, even shameful. For the first time she saw Beebo not as an overwhelming, handsome, self-assured individual, but as a very human being with a little more pride and fear and weakness than she ever permitted to show.⁷⁷

The dress transforms Beebo's demeanour. Even though she is 'over six feet,' we see that when wearing high-heels, Beebo's normally preternatural presence is subdued. Through the passages depicting Beebo in female attire, Bannon establishes a link between masculine attire and dominance, and a link between feminine attire and submissiveness. While we might interpret these connections as a mirror to heteropatriarchal gender assumptions present in the 1950s, Bannon only draws the connections in the context of *Beebo's* relationship to clothing. While Laura may adopt masculinised behaviour while wearing pants, her behaviour in skirts is not identifiably feminised.

Moreover, when Beebo dresses in feminine clothing, she appears to be more susceptible to personal attack. For example, Laura's reaction to Beebo's feminine attire is marked by her volatile reaction to Beebo's masculinity. Laura takes the opportunity to make personal attacks on Beebo's gender identity, by asking her:

Are pants really that important? [...] You're ridiculous [...] You're a little girl trying to be a little boy. And you run an elevator for the privilege. Grow up, Beebo. You'll never be a little boy. Or a big boy. You just haven't got what it takes. Not all the elevators in the world can make a boy of you. You can wear pants till you're blue in the face and it won't change what's underneath.⁷⁸

As we can see from this interaction Laura's attack on Beebo reminds readers of the deeply seeded prejudice faced by butch lesbians during the 1950s. As Christopher Nealon observes,

⁷⁷ Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, p.178

⁷⁸ Ibid. pp.180-81

Laura's verbal abuse 'violently literalizes and decontextualizes Beebo from exactly the features of her sexuality – her work, her clothes – that make her butchness three-dimensional and alive.'⁷⁹ Thus, to simply dismiss Beebo's choice of masculine attire as a heteropatriarchal hand-me-down, as Second Wave feminists would have in the 1970s, participates in the historical decontextualisation of butch gender identity.

Through the portrayal of butch gender identity in *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, we can see that pants really are 'that important.' Beebo's gender identity may be performative, but there is much at stake in Beebo's gender performance. Butler's theory of performativity acknowledges that there is an 'interior and organizing gender core' fabricated by socio-cultural norms.⁸⁰ The reality of Beebo's gender identity and the gender identity of a generation of butch lesbians is complex and informed by the cultural iconography of American masculinity. Beebo's choices in masculine attire inscribes butchness onto her body. Much like the masculine female figure in Domino's comic, Beebo is read as masculine, despite the clothing on her back. The appearance of Domino's comic, like the success of Bannon's books, highlights an inconsistency in the way *The Ladder's* LTC so vehemently disavowed butchness in the magazine. Nevertheless, the success of Bannon's novels and the discussions of butch/femme in *The Ladder*, invite a reassessment of Bannon's construction of female masculinity. The construction of Beebo's female masculinity and of her butchness not only involves Beebo's clothing and physical body. As I will explore in the next section, the way

⁷⁹ Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p.166.

⁸⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Bannon constructs and depicts Beebo's butchness also necessitates an examination of Beebo's relationships with her femme counterparts.

3. Beebo' butch desire: Butch/Femme Role Play

As previously mentioned in this chapter, Beebo Brinker is viewed through the perspective of femme protagonists in three of the four novels examined in this chapter. Thus, Beebo is predominantly placed in the position of the romantic 'other.' Because Bannon writes Beebo's character through this femme lens, it is important to examine the relationships Beebo has with her partners. In this section, I examine the relationship dynamics between Beebo and Laura in order to investigate Bannon's imagining of butch/femme relationship dynamics as they are represented in her novels.

Throughout the Beebo Brinker Chronicles, characters often make initial contact with each other through the act of looking. When Beth, Laura and Jack look at Beebo a description of her 'off-blue, wide, well-spaced' eyes⁸¹ accompanies the description of her physical body. For example, when Beth first meets Beebo in an unnamed lesbian bar Beebo always looks at Beth directly:

Beebo turned and looked [Beth] full in the face. Her lips parted slightly and she studied Beth so closely that Beth involuntarily drew away a little, clinging to the edge of the bar for support. She felt suddenly weak, although Beebo's gaze was not unkind and Beth liked her face.⁸²

⁸¹ Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, p.8.

⁸² Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, p.148.

Here, Beebo clearly returns the gaze of her femme counterparts. Beebo is not simply a spectacle to be looked at and admired; Beebo looks back and does so directly and ‘full in the face.’ This creates an exchange between Beebo and her femme partners, which creates a balance in the sexual politics at play in Bannon’s novels. The concept of ‘the gaze’ is often theorised in terms of power dynamics and the policing of bodies. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault theorizes the gaze as a tool of society, and the state to exert power over ‘docile,’ and ‘trained’ bodies of the general population. For Foucault the gaze is a means of observation and surveillance to police individuals; in other words, people will comply with social and legal norms if they believe they are being watched.⁸³ For Lacan, the gaze is a site of anxiety at the prospect of being observed by others.⁸⁴ Moreover, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright assert, ‘Looking involves relationships of power [...] To be made to look, to try to get someone else to look at you or at something you want to be noticed, or to engage in an exchange of looks, entails a play of power.’⁸⁵ Though Beebo becomes the object of the femme gaze throughout the *Chronicles*, Bannon empowers her butch character through the depiction of her eyes. While Beebo is often described through an external point-of-view, Bannon gives Beebo the power to look back. In another instance, Beth must break her own gaze, as Beebo’s becomes overpowering: ‘Beth had to turn away from Beebo’s brilliant, absorbing eyes, too troubled by her ideas to face her squarely.’⁸⁶ While Beebo may be interpreted as a fetishized butch lesbian, and therefore subject to the femme gaze, she also gazes back: in the Cellar,

⁸³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (London: Penguin 1991).

⁸⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Allain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Hogarth Press Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1977).

⁸⁵ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.10

⁸⁶ Ibid. p.158

Beebo *cruises* Laura, ‘gazing boldly, but without great interest at Laura.’⁸⁷ If we are to believe Lacan, Foucault, and Sturken and Cartwright, Bannon’s depictions of Beebo’s visual communications with others adheres to theories of power dynamics through ‘the gaze.’ From a reader’s perspective, we are placed in the perspective of others viewing, gazing, and looking at Beebo. However, neither the femme characters nor we, as readers, are placed in positions of power over Beebo. We view Beebo because Bannon directs our gaze at her, and Beebo looks back at us, boldly and from a position of power.

In her descriptions of Beebo, Bannon often utilises the gaze of others to interpret Beebo’s butchness. What Beebo wears and how she presents herself is viewed through the perspective of others who are for the most-part her femme suitors. However, it is through Beebo’s returning gaze that Bannon illustrates the prominence of Beebo’s physical presence. Coupled with her physical appearance, Beebo inspires desire in her femme counterparts. For example, on their first meeting, Beebo makes Laura ‘deeply ashamed of what she was feeling, sitting there on the barstool, letting herself be influenced by this girl she had tried so hard to despise.’⁸⁸ Despite her best efforts, Laura cannot help but be attracted to Beebo. In creating Beebo – the irresistible butch – Bannon pairs her ‘remarkably handsome’⁸⁹ physical features with an influential and charismatic physical presence. This seems to be something inherent in Beebo’s character for in *Beebo Brinker* young Beebo carries herself with an air of confidence. Under the observation of Jack we learn that Beebo’s body language exudes confidence despite her vulnerable position:

⁸⁷ Bannon, *I am a Woman*, p. 69.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

She walked with long firm strides, yet clearly did not know where she was. In her pocket was a yellow *Guide to Greenwich Village* with creased pages. Twice she stopped to consult it, comparing what she read to the unfamiliar milieu surrounding her.

A sitting duck for fast operators, Jack thought. But something wary in the way she held herself and eyed the crowd told him she knew that much herself. She was trying to defend herself against them by suspecting every passerby of ulterior motives.⁹⁰

In this passage, Bannon establishes that Beebo presents herself as a confident, even when she is not. Despite the image Beebo attempts to portray Jack Mann finds her 'odd air of authority' amusing.⁹¹ In characterising Beebo in this way, Bannon taps into and perpetuates stereotypes of masculinity that equate masculinity with power. The performance of Beebo's masculinity in her 'long firm strides' in the above passage is specifically enacted in order to guard herself against 'fast operators' who would take advantage of a young girl new to a large city like New York.

As mentioned in the previous section, Bannon's description of Beebo's clothing and her physical body appropriate the associations between masculinity and power to illustrate Beebo's influence over others. However, Beebo's taste in clothing is not only limited to her own wardrobe; she has additional expectations for how her lovers dress. Through her romantic interactions with Laura, Beebo expresses a desire for women who dress in feminine attire. In a similar way to Laura, Beebo remembers her romantic interests through their clothing. Like Laura remembering Beebo's clothing, Beebo remembers Laura's clothing: in a discussion between Jack and Laura, Jack informs her: '[Beebo] says you had on a blue dress

⁹⁰ Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, p.3.

⁹¹ Ibid.

with a white collar. You did, too. I remember it, she liked it.’⁹² In this scene, Laura is hypocritically offended and critical of the attention Beebo pays to the detail of Laura’s clothing. Beebo’s sexual desire as a butch woman is stereotypically directed towards femme lesbians who adhered to the cues of mainstream femininity in the United States during the 1950s.

Beebo’s fashion demands are not isolated to *I am a Woman*; in *Women in the Shadows*, Bannon echoes the emphasis Beebo places on her partners’ clothing: ‘Beebo liked to see [Laura] smartly dressed. She cared more about that than Laura did herself.’⁹³ In the context of this passage, Laura and Beebo are throwing an anniversary party marking the second year of their crumbling relationship. For the party, Laura has been asked to dress in a specific way. Both women dress the part of a happy couple in order to convince their friends and Beebo’s ex-lovers that their ‘corpse’ of a romance is still alive and passionate.⁹⁴ As mentioned in the previous section, the performance of gender is grounded *in part* by the attire worn by an individual. For Beebo, demonstrating her passion for Laura is tied in with her desire for the femme other. Beebo’s sexual/romantic desire for Laura is particular: if Laura does not adhere to femme beauty standards, Beebo ‘won’t like that’ according to Jack Mann.⁹⁵ Throughout the evening, Beebo also puts on a performance: by frequently touching and pinching Laura, Beebo performs an ‘advertising campaign’⁹⁶ to assert her claim on Laura, who has become romantically exhausted and smothered by Beebo’s affections.

⁹² Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, p.69.

⁹³ Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, p.2.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.1

⁹⁵ Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, p.66.

⁹⁶ Ibid p.4

Beebo's preference in Laura's clothing ultimately becomes a point of contention in their relationship. After the party's conclusion, Beebo insists on buying Laura an expensive dress as an anniversary present. This gift is just one of a series of expensive gifts Beebo gives to Laura. In a heterosexual context, Bartky critiques the way in which mainstream beauty standards oppress women into conformity: 'in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other.'⁹⁷ While it cannot be claimed that Beebo acts as a patriarchal stand-in, the shadow of heterosexist femininity informs Beebo's attraction to femme others. According to Bartky's assessment of western mainstream femininity, women's fashion serves to constrain female bodies: Laura's pumps with 'the proper shape and the newest styled heel,'⁹⁸ would throw her body 'forward and off balance.'⁹⁹ In other words, ornamentation serves to hinder women's bodies and distract them from more intellectual and physical pursuits. While this assessment may inadvertently privilege attributes that have been historically associated with masculinity – i.e. physical strength and intellectual pursuits – in the context of 1950s and 1960s American society, the trappings of western femininity are not a choice but an unspoken mandate. Beebo's attraction to specific modes of femininity is not in and of itself oppressive, but Laura is oppressed by Beebo's insistence that Laura dresses in a manner she does not care for. While it is tempting to write Beebo's oppressive behaviour as a heteropatriarchal hand-me-down, the explanation does not capture the nuances of 1950s/1960s butch/femme relationships. The intricacies of Beebo and Laura's relationship

⁹⁷ Bartky, p.34.

⁹⁸ Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, p.2.

⁹⁹ Bartky, p.34

must be examined further in order to interpret Bannon's representation of butch/femme in her novels. Critically viewing Beebo's relationship with Laura through close reading, allows us to examine how Bannon constructs her butch/femme romantic couples, and to identify what is specifically problematic.

Beebo's desire for Laura to embody an idealised femme role further manifests in her desire to shower Laura with gifts. From Laura's perspective, the unaffordable gifts Beebo buys for her feel like 'a bid for her love, a sort of investment Beebo was making for Laura's good will.'¹⁰⁰ Laura ultimately concedes to Beebo's wants, further establishing a power imbalance in their relationship. There is a contrast in the way Bannon represents the dominant and submissive gender roles of Beebo and Laura from the conclusion of *I am a Woman* and *Women in the Shadows*. Bannon's ending to *I am a Woman* is presented as a happy one: Laura finally realises her lesbian sexual identity, and is seemingly content to participate in a butch/femme relationship with Beebo. The beginning of *Women in the Shadows*, however depicts Laura falling out of love with Beebo two years later.¹⁰¹ Upon close examination of *Women in the Shadows* this power dynamic appears to be consistent throughout their two-year relationship: through a smile, Beebo calls Laura a 'little bitch' and tips Laura's face up to kiss her.¹⁰² In Bannon's narration of Laura's thoughts, she 'could not be sure where she had gone wrong or when that lovely flush of desire had begun to wane in

¹⁰⁰ Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, p.28.

¹⁰¹ 'Laura resented the love she could no longer return. Perhaps it was anger at her own failing, her own empty heart. Laura felt a sort of shame when Beebo embraced her. She blamed herself secretly for her fading affection. Beebo's love had been the stronger and in Beebo's words, when she spoke of it, the truest.' Ibid., p.20. Beebo and Laura living together for this length of time is seen as an accomplishment in Greenwich Village. Ibid, p.2.

¹⁰² Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, p.232.

her. She only knew that one day, she did not want Beebo to touch her.’¹⁰³ While Laura is unable to articulate the reasons she no longer loves Beebo, interpretations can be made based on the lived experiences of those who lived through the 1950s. Based on Rita Laporte’s criticisms, as members of an urban lesbian bar community, Beebo and Laura have a problematic butch/femme relationship for they participate in a ‘genuine copying in heterosexual roles.’ While both Beebo and Laura are employed, Beebo’s fetishisation of Laura’s femininity, her insistence on giving Laura expensive gifts, and her jealous behaviour indicate a misogynistic attempt to assert her butch masculinity. To be clear, it is not the expression of Beebo’s masculinity that is inherently oppressive to Laura, but the fact that Laura’s expression of her femininity is subsumed by Beebo’s expectations. If Laura was a willing participant in a version of femininity compatible with Beebo’s desire, their butch/femme relationship would not ape heterosexist roles. Nevertheless, reading the behaviour exhibited in Beebo and Laura’s relationship furthers a problematic reading of 1950s and 1960s butch/femme stereotypes.

In the context of her relationship with Laura, Beebo adopts physically and sexually assertive behaviour. Though Laura initially feels animosity toward her, Beebo does not terminate her romantic advances towards Laura. After a night of drinking in The Cellar Beebo leads Laura home instead of sending her to her own apartment:

Beebo led Laura through the small living room to an even smaller bedroom and sat her down on the bed. She knelt in front of her and took her shoes off. Then, gently, she leaned against her, forcing her legs slightly apart, and put her arms around Laura’s waist. She rubbed her head against Laura’s breasts and said, “don’t be afraid baby.” Laura tried weakly to hold her off but she said, “I won’t hurt you

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Laura,” and looked up at her. She squeezed her gently, rhythmically, her arms tightening around Laura’s body. She made a little sound in her throat and, lifting her face, kissed Laura’s neck. And then she stood up, slowly releasing her.¹⁰⁴

In this passage, Bannon aligns sexual behaviour on gendered lines. Beebo takes on a sexually aggressive role with an intoxicated Laura. The entire scene is disturbing. Though Beebo does not force Laura into having sexual intercourse with her, Laura’s personal space is invaded by Beebo. Because Laura does not consent to Beebo’s advances, and even attempts to ‘hold her off,’ this scene takes on a disturbing tone. Bannon continues the scene with Beebo leaving Laura to sleep in her bed, while she takes the couch.

The sexual politics between Beebo and Laura are often described in terms of Laura’s submissive role: Laura ‘surrenders’ to Beebo’s passion (and her own) by kissing Beebo. Laura is often physically placed lower than Beebo; Laura is either described as ‘looking up’ at Beebo, or that Beebo is ‘looking down’ at Laura. Laura’s submissive role to Beebo remains consistent through *I am a Woman*, and *Women in the Shadows*. For example, when Laura attempts to regain Beebo’s affections, she places herself at Beebo’s feet and begs her to take her back: ‘Laura looked up then, slowly, still very afraid. She was prepared for any violence, any brutality. It no longer mattered if Beebo hurt her or not. She was ready to submit to anything if Beebo would only take her back.’¹⁰⁵ Here, Bannon emphasises Laura’s willingness to submit to Beebo, now that she has realised the *value*¹⁰⁶ of Beebo’s intense love for her. Though she fears Beebo’s violence, she is prepared to be punished for her infidelity. When Beebo questions Laura’s change of heart, Laura replies, ‘I was miserably unhappy because of you. I

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.91

¹⁰⁵ Bannon. *Women in the Shadows*, p.178.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.162.

had to get away. I found out I'm more unhappy without you than with you.'¹⁰⁷ What we see through Laura's perspective is an internalisation of violent sexual discourse. In other words, Laura has associated violence and sexuality when it comes to her relationship with Beebo. Moreover, Laura treats Beebo and their unstable relationship as a better alternative to a greater misery. Beebo's dominance, exerted through her physical presence, becomes an all-encompassing facet of her sexual self.

Returning to Laura's first night with Beebo, we see how Bannon creates a complex sexual politics between the two women. After Beebo has left Laura to sleep in her living room, Bannon details how Laura's desire for another woman keeps her awake, until she decides to wake Beebo to have sex with her.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps more unnerving (at least to a 21st century perspective) is the language used to describe sexual relations between characters. Jack Mann, perhaps looking out for Laura's safety, speaks to Beebo over the phone the next morning. We do not hear Jack's side of the conversation, only Beebo's: 'No I didn't rape her, she raped me.'¹⁰⁹ The term 'rape' is used only once more in *I am a Woman*; when Laura asks Jack to set her female co-worker up on a date with one of his male co-workers, he responds, 'I'd better find her a tame one [...] Whatever that means. Jesus, the poor girl has probably dreamed all her life of a good thorough raping.'¹¹⁰ It would be too dismissive to interpret the use of rape as one of Bannon's '1950's flaws.' Instead, I suggest that using 'rape' to refer to sexual intercourse highlights the gendered dynamics of sexual relationships in the 1950s. In the language used by Bannon, we can see evidence of a prevalent rape culture in the United

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pp.178-179.

¹⁰⁸ Bannon, *I am a Woman*, pp.93.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.99.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.123.

States during the 1950s. According to Alyn Pearson, instances of rape have become endemic to American society.¹¹¹ Though Pearson is discussing rape culture in the 2000s, evidence of the permissibility of rape and the process of victim-blaming can be seen in *Spring Fire* (1952) as discussed in chapter three. Moreover, as Pearson argues, 'Rape is not an epidemic that spiked mysteriously in the mid-seventies when feminists called attention to it.'¹¹²

As mentioned in previous chapters, imagery of rape and sexual assault in lesbian pulp fiction appears as common-place.¹¹³ In the dialogues held between Laura and Jack and Beebo and Jack, rape is conceived of as an act of unchecked sexual desire and masculinised dominance over femininity. According to Pearson, the sexualisation of rape has become a common occurrence in media depictions of rape:

They depict rape as rough, unwanted sex, that is nevertheless sexy. They show the frail, beautiful woman and the big beautiful man engaged in sexual intercourse that just happens to be accompanied by mutters of no and some tears, or some serious drunken sleeping. Rape scenes in movies are geared to turn people on, not shock them.¹¹⁴

These images of rape perpetuate the 'myth that rape is about sex and not about power, and that rape is about lust and not oppressive violence.'¹¹⁵ Neither Beebo nor Laura rape the other in their love scenes. Thus the reason the term 'rape' is used when Jack questions their sexual

¹¹¹ Alyn Pearson, 'Rape Culture: It's all around us' in *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 30 No.8 (August/September 2000). pp.12-14

¹¹² Ibid. p.14

¹¹³ In *Spring Fire*, Leda urges Mitch to cover-up her the fact that Bud raped her for the sake of social propriety. In *Odd Girl Out*, Laura is molested by her date, while her housemate Emily and her boyfriend sit across the table from them.

¹¹⁴ Pearson, p.14.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

encounter is perplexing. Nevertheless, the use of rape language evinces the pervasiveness of rape culture in the 1950s. Thus, in Bannon's descriptions of sexual behaviour, sexuality and violence are conceptually inseparable.

Rape and sexual violence play a further role in Bannon's series, but it is treated differently in *Women in the Shadows*, and in *Journey to a Woman*. In *Women in the Shadows* Beebo fakes a rape in order to gain Laura's pity and in *Journey to a Woman* Charlie attempts to rape Beth in their car before running away from her marriage.¹¹⁶ Historically, rape played a pervasive role in the lesbian community, for the traumatic experience of being raped was also cited as the cause for a woman turning to lesbianism. In *We Walk Alone* (1952), Ann Aldrich reported that 'there are many instances where a woman who has turned from heterosexuality to homosexuality, or who has remained fixed at the homosexual level throughout her experience did experience a lack of tenderness, inconsiderateness, and brutality at the hands of a man.'¹¹⁷ While there is nothing accurate about the supposed causal relationship between rape and female homosexuality, as a commonly held belief, it was embedded within 1950s and 1960s cultural consciousness. For members of the butch/femme community rape was an all-too pervasive reality. According to Robin Maltz,

'As butch/femme communities proliferated in the 1940s and 1950s amidst a social climate of State-sanctioned homosexual intolerance, butch/femme bars and clubs were subject to police raids and butches were routinely stripped and

¹¹⁶ '[Charlie] tried to kiss her again, but Beth struggled wildly, trying to hurt him. And all the while he was wooing her with violence, almost the way he had when they first met, as if he knew now too that words were long since worthless between them.' Ann Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, (Cleis Press Inc.: San Francisco, 2003), p.89.

¹¹⁷ Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone*, The Feminist Press: New York, 2006, p.90.

raped by cops under the pretence of enforcing state law requiring a female to wear at least three items of women's clothing.'¹¹⁸

Bannon highlights the risk and reality of rape in the butch/femme community in *Women in the Shadows*.

Beebo, who is desperate to hold onto Laura despite their crumbling relationship, stages a rape crime scene for Laura to find when she returns home. Beebo's dog Nix is brutally killed 'his belly slit open from jaws to tail' with a chef's knife.¹¹⁹ Beebo is found lying on her bed, 'badly hurt' and naked 'from the waist down.'¹²⁰ Beebo, refusing a doctor explains to Laura what happened to her:

It's an old story [...] I don't know why it didn't happen to me years sooner. Nearly every butch I know gets it one way or another. Sooner or later they catch up with you [...] the goddam sonofabitch toughs who think it's smart to pick fights with Lesbians. They ask you who the hell do you think they are, going around in pants all the time. They say if you're going to wear pants and act like a man you can dam well fight like a man. And they jump you for laughs.¹²¹

It is not until much later in the narrative that Bannon reveals that Beebo staged the crime in a desperate attempt to maintain her relationship with Laura. While Beebo's rape is staged, the explanation Beebo gives Laura is grounded by the historical reality faced by lesbian women within the rape culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Within a rape culture, fear is often used to control women and contain female sexuality. For butch/femme women, this reality

¹¹⁸ Maltz, p.281

¹¹⁹ Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*, p.89.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.90

¹²¹ Ibid., p.54.

of an institutionalised rape culture and police brutality looms over the community and by extension the fictionalised Greenwich Village in *Women in the Shadows*.

4. Conclusions

Beebo is a 'butch lesbian,' or at least, this is how I have read her. Bannon imagines Beebo in this way as a biological female who has characteristics who make her 'look like a boy' throughout her imagined life. This does not preclude Beebo from transgender readings (or even transgender readings). Beebo does voice a desire to be biologically male at one point in the text, but the 1950s context gender and sexuality are conceptually linked. This fact influences Beebo's (Bannon's) logic, and may be one of the 'flaws' she refers to in the epitaph to *Beebo Brinker*. Is Beebo a stone butch? This is difficult for me to decipher. My outsider's perspective leads me to argue that reading Beebo as a stone butch is possible. Is Beebo untouchable? No, there are scenes where Beebo has been touched during sexual intercourse. The location of Beebo's tactile involvement is never disclosed. If we believe Kennedy and Davis, being touched does not exclude an individual from the 'stone' identifier, much in the same way that participating in heterosex does not automatically exclude an individual from a homosexual identity.

In terms of Beebo's gender expression, Bannon writes her in such a way that it is – while dramatized -- believable within the context of 1950s/1960s butch/femme lesbian bar culture. In many ways Beebo's character participates in and perpetuates stereotypes of butch identity, but simultaneously show instances of vulnerability within female masculine identity. Beebo's imagined butchness may participate in the fetishisation of 1950s/1960s butchness,

but in turn Beebo fetishises her femme lover, Laura. While this cycle of fetishisation is problematic, it highlights a 1950s butch/femme dynamic that was present in lesbian bar culture and very real to members of various lesbian bar communities. Thus while Beebo's character may represent many of the flaws Bannon mentions in her foreword, Beebo's character also celebrates female masculinity in a time when butch lesbians were vilified not only by mainstream society, but by other, middle-class lesbians. In developing Beebo as a complex butch lesbian, Bannon's series of novels provided her readers with a multidimensional 'romantic phantom.' Closely Beebo's butchness allows for an interrogation of butch/femme in the late 1950s through the early 1960s, and illustrates how Bannon's pulp novels surpass their status as 'throw-away fiction.'

Conclusion

Really Good Paperback Originals

There are no really good paperback originals around anymore. I can't help wondering what happened to Valerie Taylor, Paula Christian, Ann Bannon, etc. Rumors circulate and say that Ann Bannon has given up writing. Valerie Taylor and Paula Christian seem to feel there is no publishing market for their kind of book, and Artemis Smith has left the field in favor of working toward hardback publication in esoteric fiction (which hasn't actually happened yet). It is, to put it bluntly, a damned shame, because the audience who bought their books by the thousands of copies still exist, still live in isolated towns throughout the United States and still needs this vicarious involvement with a world they cannot or do not share personally.

- Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana', September, 1967.¹

As emphasised in my introduction, lesbian readers and writers were able to use literature as a means of connection to a wider lesbian community, even if the community was an imagined one. As Gene Damon's statement in the September 1967 publication of *The Ladder* shows, there was an audience of lesbian readers who needed 'really good paperback originals' to connect with a world and a community that they could not readily access. Reading lesbian periodicals and pulps through the lens of lesbian textual communities and lesbian readership allows us to access portions of lesbian history that illustrate the

¹ Gene Damon, 'Lesbiana' in *The Ladder*, Vol. 11 No. 11, September 1967, p.12.

experiences, emotions, and realities lived by individual lesbians and communities of lesbians before the Stonewall Riot and Gay Liberation Movement. What my research has revealed is that at least some lesbians were politically conscious, as evinced by their reading of lesbian representations in popular media. They were concerned with their rights as citizens of the United States, and the aspects of their lives that were negatively impacted by the fact that they loved and desired members of the same biological sex. As Chapter One established, the members of *The Ladder's* LTC were deeply concerned about the representation of lesbians in mainstream media. Lesbian readers of this LTC were vocal about their desire for happy (or happier) endings for lesbian protagonists. Moreover, as illustrated in Chapter Two, Three, and Four, the members of the particular LTC did not take *Spring Fire* (1952) and *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* (1957-1962) at face value; they actively read and engaged with reading material that was marketed as entertainment for a male voyeuristic audience.

By closely reading lesbian pulp fiction, this thesis participates in creating a precedent for examining other works of genre fiction that may have previously been ignored. Lesbian Pulps, Science Fiction, Detective Fiction, and Romance Fiction among other paperback original genres are not necessarily devoid of social or political commentary. I have shown that simply because the medium is intended to entertain, it does not preclude a work of fiction from close textual analysis to investigate the messages communicated to a general audience. In Chapter Two, Three, and Four, I have utilised *The Ladder's* LTC as a lens through which to conduct textual analysis that takes historical contexts into consideration. Moreover, reading lesbian pulp fiction through the lens of *The Ladder's* lesbian textual community enables us to examine the merit of these texts with regard to those who read them at their time of publication. *The*

Ladder provides literary historians with first-hand, documented, opinions and review of lesbian pulp fiction.

It has been my intention through this thesis to expand upon the study of lesbian literary history and textual communities within a pre-Stonewall context. The small, yet growing, body of work that exists on *The Ladder* and lesbian pulp fiction deserves consideration beyond their role as artefacts of lesbian herstory. What I have shown through my analysis of *The Ladder* and the selected works of Vin Packer and Ann Bannon, is that there is more to these texts than their materiality. The work of these authors enabled discussion on the subject of representational politics in this specific LTC, and additionally engaged both implicitly and explicitly with sexual politics during the 1950s and early 1960s. In other words, some lesbian pulps were able to implicitly and explicitly communicate dissent against the status quo and call attention to the sexism and homophobia faced by lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, these seemingly ‘trashy’ novels sparked debate and discussion amongst their lesbian audience. Nevertheless, there is still much more material to be investigated in *The Ladder* and in the works of other women authors of lesbian pulp novels. Unfortunately the space afforded this thesis could not do justice to the work of Artemis Smith, Paula Christian, and Valerie Taylor in addition to Vin Packer and Ann Bannon’s novels. With further research, it would be possible to thoroughly investigate each author and closely examine the explicit and implicit political and social commentary that their work articulates.

In essence, this thesis is located at an intersection of disciplines. It is both a cultural and historical study in lesbian literature. The first chapter is deeply involved in print culture, while the final three chapters are focused on reading lesbian pulp novels through the lens of *The Ladder*’s lesbian textual community (LTC). Through my research and analysis, this thesis

contributes to a small body of work on the subject of pre-Stonewall lesbian literary studies within the United States. Moreover, this thesis participates in the historicisation of lesbian literary contributions. If we reconsider the role of lesbian print materials like *The Ladder* and lesbian pulp novels in the development of Queer political consciousness in the United States, this history begins some years before the night of June 28, 1968, which has been considered the birth of the Gay Civil Rights Movement, and has been celebrated with annual Gay Pride Parades across the United States. Additionally, as a project based in literary studies, this thesis contributes to a revaluation of texts that are otherwise considered non-academic.

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