

*The Safe Sea
of Women*

LESBIAN FICTION

1969–1989

Bonnie Zimmerman

BEACON PRESS • BOSTON

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藏书章

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To the women of Lesbian Nation

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. . . and now she and the assistant and all women swam in a field of brilliant green, buoyed up by unbelievable green—gathered in a giant sweep all yellow and blue and scooped it into one untouchable safe sea of women.

—June Arnold, *SISTER GIN*

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Finally, there can be no criticism without creation. So I conclude by thanking the writers whose works made my own possible.

Preface

As a graduate student in the early 1970s, I discovered a reference work that was to serve me as well as any research tool my professors offered: *The Lesbian in Literature*, a bibliography compiled by Gene Damon, the preliberation pseudonym for writer, editor, and publisher Barbara Grier.¹ For days on end I sequestered myself in the university library, conscientiously looking up every novel assigned the letter "A," for "major lesbian characters, and/or action." Unsatiated, I then moved on to "B," for "minor" lesbian characters, and even to "C," for "latent, repressed lesbianism." To the literary critic growing within me, the category "C" promised the rich territory of subversive textual strategies to be decoded and deconstructed. But the impatient political activist had no time for codes. What she wanted were novels that proclaimed the word "lesbian" from the rooftops.

Only occasionally in those years did I come upon a novel—such as *Desert of the Heart* (1964) by Jane Rule or *The Price of Salt* (1952) by Clare Morgan (pseudonym for Patricia Highsmith)—that projected such a positive and empowering image of lesbians. Primarily, I found dreary portrayals of self-hating "inverts"—like Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall's classic *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)—or snide satires of effete, self-absorbed "sapphists" as in Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* (1928). Since then I have come to recognize the historical significance of these novels. But in those days of emerging lesbian feminist consciousness, I, like many other women at the time, wanted a literature that expressed the new truths and visions we were creating for ourselves. And so, a generation of authors began to write us into existence.

One author had already initiated this project. In 1969, novelist Alma

Routson, under the pseudonym Isabel Miller, wrote *A Place for Us*, a love story about two women that rewrote all the established conventions of such stories: the sinister, half-inhuman creature seducing the innocent maiden; the symbolism of deviance and damnation; the inauthentic ending with each woman safely married or dead, but definitely not together in each other's arms. Her novel was romantic and pastoral, the lovers were equally responsible and involved, and they ended up together on the last page. This was a new plot for the lesbian novel and a new beginning for lesbian literature as a whole: the establishment of a literary and symbolic "place" for lesbian writers and readers.

Isabel Miller could not find a commercial publisher for her gentle tale, since it did not conform to the expectations of publishers or the reading public.² In 1969, it was as yet unthinkable that two women could love each other and be rewarded with a home and happiness rather than condemned to marriage or death. So Miller printed the novel herself and peddled it around the newly formed women's organizations in New York City and in the pages of *The Ladder*, newsletter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the sole lesbian organization existing at that time. The book's publishing history was a fitting symbol of the erasure of lesbians from public consciousness in the late 1960s, and its underground success foreshadowed what would become a burgeoning alternative publishing industry.

A Place for Us soon became one of the shuttles weaving the web of lesbian community from woman to woman, group to group, city to city. Dog-eared copies were passed around, greatly multiplying the impact of its modest print run of two thousand copies. I was but one of many women in those early days who entered through its pages into a new world I had barely imagined possible. Like the novel's lovers, thousands of us—some already lesbians, others just coming out—embarked upon a journey of heart, mind, and body: "Oh, we were begun. There would be no way out except through" (33).³ By 1972, when McGraw-Hill bought the rights to *A Place for Us* and set it on bookstore shelves under the innocuous title of *Patience and Sarah*, lesbians all over the country were enthusiastically turning Isabel Miller's fantasy into reality.

And yet, *Patience and Sarah* might have remained a treasured anomaly, along with a few other grand exceptions, had it not been for the women who put their feminist principles into practice by starting independent

women's presses. One of these, Daughters Inc., published some of the most creative and carefully crafted lesbian fiction ever to appear, as well as the representative contemporary lesbian novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown (1973). Molly Bolt, the hero of this immensely successful book, was a new kind of lesbian figure—brash and unashamed, exuberantly sexual, and ultimately triumphant. Molly reveled in her outlaw status and set herself above the boring world of ordinary mortals. She represented what we were beginning to feel about ourselves, that to be a lesbian was to be daring, special, unique, and very fortunate.

But Patience and Sarah, and Molly Bolt, take off on their journeys alone and end up in their own private worlds still isolated from other women. In contrast, utopian fictions mapped out the terrain of exclusively female communities. One of these, *Les Guérillères* (1971), an epic prose-poem by French author Monique Wittig, created in a text what feminists were attempting to create through social and political activism: an entirely new way of thinking about women, patriarchy, language, and alternative social structures. This new way of thinking was by no means limited to lesbians, neither in the political nor the literary arena. But lesbians in particular were attracted to the notion of a separate space for women. We eventually named this space "Lesbian Nation" after the title of Jill Johnston's 1973 collection of wildly experimental newspaper columns, a book that laid some of the groundwork for what would become lesbian feminist theory.

At first, we new residents of Lesbian Nation felt ourselves to be united in the warm glow of "sisterhood," sexuality, and community—what June Arnold, in *Sister Gin* (1975), was to romantically label the "safe sea of women." But, as sisters often discover, even the closest relationship can be undermined or destroyed by fear, misunderstanding, and differences. The distinctly different outlooks and needs of women of varying sexualities, races, and classes began to splinter existing feminist and lesbian groups. Arnold's *The Cook and the Carpenter*, published in 1973 along with *Rubyfruit Jungle*, captured both the ideal of sisterhood and the reality of difference that were soon to dominate the theory and practice of the lesbian movement.

After 1973, lesbian activists moved in several different directions. Some of us remained active in various gay, feminist, or progressive organizations. Others left these groups completely to form the political

movement of lesbian separatism, which concentrated on creating political theory, living collectives, and alternative institutions. Still others were attracted to what came to be called "cultural feminism," which tried to define a uniquely female nature, vision, and artistic expression. But whatever place we made for ourselves, we were part of the extraordinary phenomenon of creating a lesbian community and lesbian culture.

Since 1971, I have participated in the formation of this lesbian community. I also have been an avid reader of lesbian fiction. Although not a fiction writer myself, I have produced lesbian literary criticism and theory for both academic and lesbian journals, books, and newspapers. It has long been my intention to write a book about lesbian literature for the two groups to which I belong, the academic world of women's studies and the lesbian community.

The result is *The Safe Sea of Women*, an overview of the lesbian fiction published primarily by alternative feminist presses in the 1970s and 1980s. I attempt to read this fiction as the collective voice of what we loosely call "the lesbian community." In doing so, I use the fiction to identify what lesbians of the past two decades believe to be the "truth" about lesbian existence.

I have not written a historical or sociological document, although I do note the historical trends found within the genre and relate these back to the community that shapes and is shaped by them. Nor do I provide a sweeping "objective" analysis of the past twenty years of lesbian publishing. After all, it is still very much in process. Each year since 1984, when I began to develop the ideas that turned into this book, more than twenty new novels have appeared, and there are no signs that this proliferation is abating. Several literary journals, including *Sinister Wisdom*, *Conditions*, and *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, publish short fiction as well. Moreover, the political priorities of the community shift continually. Finally, I have been too involved in the community to take the stance of the detached critic, if such a stance is ever possible.

Instead, I want to echo Michal Brody's introduction to *Are We There Yet?* (the history of "Lavender Woman," a Chicago-based lesbian newspaper on which I worked from 1973 to 1975):

The history that follows is not a matter of record in any national publication. It is written the way I remember it, imperfectly, to be sure, and with personal bias. . . . Other witnesses will no doubt find disagreement between their accounts and mine. That's fine. If a single, concrete Truth were possible, this book wouldn't be interesting or even necessary. Contradiction, and what we do with it, is what it's all about.⁴

The Safe Sea of Women expresses my own individual analysis of lesbian fiction. Its perspective neither defines the genre nor represents "the" lesbian point of view. Of course, such a stance can be ingenuous, since fewer books on this literature are likely to be published than on more mainstream writers and texts. With this in mind, I have tried to be as dispassionate and responsible as possible, while still retaining my own point of view. But I do urge all readers to approach this book as the product of one thoughtful yet necessarily biased mind. The bias in my case is provided by my history as a white, professional academic who "came out" in the context of the women's liberation movement of the early 1970s. I look forward to other lesbian critics providing their own perspectives on contemporary lesbian writing. The "contradictions" between our accounts may well provide the space in which future lesbian fiction flourishes.

The Safe Sea of Women began with a short paper written for a conference on women's culture in 1984. Any piece of literary criticism is in its own way the creation of another story—a meta-story, if you like—and in that original conference paper, I outlined the "plot" of what became this book. As the first chapter explains, I view lesbian fiction as the expression of a collective "myth of origins" with four primary divisions (which have become the four inner chapters): the lesbian self, the lesbian couple, the lesbian community, and community and difference. My methodology was traditional: I began with close readings of every novel, memoir, and short story collection that might be labeled lesbian—close to 225 texts, 167 of which are included in this study. Although my analysis has been influenced and invigorated by various critical theories (some will say too much, some will say too little), I have tried always to

give pride of place to the fiction itself. I have also allowed the specific texts, and the questions they raise, to dictate the particular methods and approaches I use.

For over a year, I read, annotated, compared, organized, patterned, and pondered until I felt I had located (or—remembering that criticism is itself invention—created) the most characteristic and prevalent symbols and structures within lesbian fiction. I then began to write my story. It has taken over three years to do so, and often I have felt like Alice and the Red Queen running as hard as they could just to stay in the same place. The beginning point was easy enough to choose—1969 was a watershed year—but what would serve as my end? Although friends advised me to set a cut-off date, I simply couldn't; my too-prolific authors kept writing more novels that perfectly fit, or didn't fit, my analysis. I kept adding new examples to the existing chapters, where they remain, until it became clear that my near plot would require an epilogue. That has become chapter six, which discusses fiction since 1986. Finally, on New Year's Day 1989 (okay, it wasn't quite that tidy), I had to acknowledge the necessity of completion. Hence, the subtitle: *Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989*.

I want to say something about the audience I had in mind while writing this book. Although I hope it will be read by everyone, I have aimed it at a composite figure who is a feminist academic and a lesbian activist. This has not been an easy task. But I have tried to use the tools of contemporary critical theory, while writing in the language of what Virginia Woolf celebrated as "the common reader."⁵ A related challenge has been to define my own voice, particularly in the matter of pronouns. Adrienne Rich has written, in a context to which I will return in chapter five, that "even ordinary pronouns become a political problem."⁶ My version of the problem has been when to say "I," when to say "we," and when to say "they." I am not entirely satisfied with my solution, but here it is. When I directly express my own opinion, I use "I." When I am speaking about and from the amorphous and generic lesbian community, or to the representative reader, I use "we." When difference and particularity are the focus of the argument, I use "they" to refer to specific groups to which I do not belong. I hope the context will clarify my choices.

Finally, the hardest part of writing this book has been to silence the internal voices that would keep me from writing at all. These voices have many intonations. One very powerful voice belongs to the archetypal Parent who whispers, "But what will the neighbors think?" An even stronger voice is that of the Lesbian Censor who shouts, "You can't say that: it's _____" (fill in the blank yourself). At times—many, many times—I have felt like the protagonist of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* who "tells" on her people. But I hope that I convey in these pages the strong loyalty and affection I feel for the lesbian community and the respect I have for its written expression. I write not as an outsider looking in, but as an insider looking around.

"It Makes a Great Story": Lesbian Culture and the Lesbian Novel

She was telling some one, who was loving every story that was charming. Some one who was living was almost always listening. Some one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was telling about being one then listening. That one being loving was then telling stories having a beginning and a middle and an ending.

—Gertrude Stein, ADA

In the Glorious Age, the lesbian peoples call the old storytellers, bearers of fables. The bearers of fables come from everywhere and go everywhere.

—Monique Wittig, LESBIAN PEOPLES

{These stories} do what I had hoped stories would do: Provoke, teach, reveal women to other women, arouse strong emotions, redefine—because they are true.

—Judy Grahn, TRUE TO LIFE ADVENTURE STORIES I

perspective on the quality of lesbian fiction. Following that, it examines the relationship between myth and reality as it is presented in lesbian fiction. Finally, it presents an introduction to the complex "myth of origins" that lesbian writers have constructed and that the rest of the book explores.

The Roots of Contemporary Lesbian Literature

In a 1976 essay on lesbian literature, novelist Bertha Harris argued that to "make a body of work that can be immediately perceived as a 'literature' . . . there must first exist cultural *identity*: a group or a nation must know that it exists *as a group* and that it shares sets of characteristics that make it distinct from other groups." To have a literature, she continued, lesbians must see themselves as a group with a history and sense of "realness."² To understand lesbian literature as a specific genre, therefore, it is necessary to consider how lesbians developed an identity as lesbians.

Prior to the twentieth century, women certainly loved other women, chose them as companions, and expressed erotic longings for them. We can draw this conclusion from Greek myths of virgin goddesses and their female followers, from international tales of female transvestites and amazons, from the Old Testament story of Ruth and Naomi, and especially from the lyric poetry written by Sappho (ca. 612–558 B.C.) on the Mediterranean island of Lesbos. On occasion, woman-to-woman eroticism erupts in works by writers such as the medieval troubador Biers de Romans, the British restoration playwright Aphra Behn, and the nineteenth-century Chinese poet Wu Tsao.³

Moreover, between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries in western Europe and North America, some women experienced loving and supportive (although not necessarily sexual) relationships with other women that literary historian Lillian Faderman has named "romantic friendships."⁴ These passionate and spiritual relationships were recorded in letters and diaries, and recreated in numerous novels and poems, including Sarah Scott's *Millenium [sic] Hall* (1762), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary: A Fiction* (1787), Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1859), Louisa May Alcott's *Work* (1873), George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossroads* (1885), and Sarah Orne Jewett's "Martha's Lady" (1897).

During the past two decades, more than two hundred novels, memoirs, and short story collections have been written and published by women who align themselves with the lesbian movement. A few of these works have been published by mainstream publishers, but since the mid-seventies the vast majority have been published by alternative, usually feminist or gay, presses.¹ They are advertised through lesbian networks, sold in women's bookstores, and reviewed in lesbian, gay, and feminist newspapers. Like Isabel Miller's *A Place for Us*, they are passed around from friend to friend. Their politics, ideas, and literary quality are hotly debated both privately and publicly. Lesbian fiction, therefore, provides unparalleled source material with which to explore the ideas and beliefs of the lesbian community. If the lesbian novel merely mirrored the political and cultural concerns of lesbians, it still would serve an important historical function. But, I will argue, it has helped shape a lesbian consciousness, community, and culture from the movement's beginning.

Fiction is a particularly useful medium through which to shape a new lesbian consciousness, for fiction, of all literary forms, makes the most complex and detailed use of historical events and social discourse. By incorporating many interacting voices and points of view, novelists give the appearance of reality to a variety of imaginary worlds. Novels can show us as we were, as we are, and as we would like to be. This is a potent combination for a group whose very existence has been either suppressed or distorted. Lesbian novelists, then, have taken on the project of writing us into our own version of reality. To do this, they have revised the fragmented and distorted plots inherited from the past as new and "charming" lesbian stories that possess "a beginning and a middle and an ending." My purpose in this book is to show what these stories are and how the lesbian community endows them with meaning.

This chapter begins with a brief history of lesbian literature and an analysis of how, during the past twenty years, lesbian feminists established a sense of community and cultural identity. Second, it outlines the factors I use to define the contemporary genre of lesbian fiction. Next, it offers an explanation for why this genre is important, and a

Women in the past, however, lacked the "sense of historical continuity" that Bertha Harris claims is a requirement for an explicit lesbian literature. Few felt themselves to be different from other women of their time, or to have an identity defined by a particular sexuality. Although we can recognize lesbian *behavior* or *feelings* throughout the centuries and across all cultures and nationalities, lesbian *identity* was the creation of the late nineteenth century.

Historians identify a number of factors that account for the rise of modern-day lesbianism in the western world.⁵ Among these was the increased participation of women in the workforce that permitted some women sufficient economic independence to choose where to live and with whom. In female enclaves such as boarding schools, colleges, and settlement houses, some middle-class women chose lifelong companionship with other women over conventional marriages.⁶ The nineteenth-century women's rights movement, like its counterpart in the 1970s, further stimulated the emergence of lesbian identity by increasing women's self-esteem, criticizing heterosexual norms, and providing another female space in which political passions might be eroticized. Sex-segregated factories may have provided similar opportunities for working-class women, although low wages made independent living difficult. Perhaps because of these economic barriers some of these women chose to live, work, and marry as men, often exposed only at their deaths as women.

Not all the influences on emerging lesbian (and gay) culture and identity were salutary, however. In the late nineteenth century, medical experts, or sexologists, began to define same-sex love and sexuality. At first they proclaimed homosexuality to be a congenital condition, if not defect, characterized primarily by cross-gender identification. In other words, lesbians belonged to a "third sex"; they were male souls trapped in women's bodies. This theory was challenged and displaced by Freud and his followers, who described lesbians as women whose normal sexual development had been arrested at an immature, adolescent stage. Although strikingly different from each other, both congenital and psychoanalytic theories "morbidity," as Lillian Faderman puts it, the love between women that in earlier centuries had been tolerated or even sanctified.⁷

In addition, the public presence and influence of the women's rights movement throughout the second half of the nineteenth century generated an anti-feminist reaction that we today would call lesbian-baiting. Women might write glowingly about living together in eternal bliss when they were economically, politically, and legally dependent upon men, but when suffragists and "new women" took advantage of their hard-won legal rights and economic opportunities to turn fantasy into reality, society drew the line. Sylvia Stevenson's recently rediscovered novel *Surplus* (1924) illustrates how post-World War I literature shifted public attitudes by providing cautionary stereotypes of unnatural, "race suicidal" women who preferred female friendships to heterosexual love and childbearing.⁸

Among these stereotypes was the figure of the sinister monster who preys upon innocent younger women. A lesbian version of the femme fatale, or dangerous woman, the man-hating spinster with her unnatural control over another woman took on mythic proportions in late-nineteenth and twentieth century literature.⁹ In Sheridan LeFanu's ghost story, "Carmilla" (1871), she becomes an actual blood-sucking vampire. This unnatural creature inhabits the pages of novels as different in historical era and literary significance as Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1885), Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women* (1915), D. H. Lawrence's *The Fox* (1922), and Dorothy Baker's *Trio* (1943). Along with the immature child afraid of womanhood and the masculine woman, both inspired by sexology theories, the predatory monster became a common lesbian stereotype persisting to the present day.¹⁰ Hence, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, lesbians began to have a label, an identity, for themselves, but that label was connected to notions of sickness and perversion.

Competing with these anti-feminist and medical discourses, however, was the distinctly lesbian literature and sensibility that arose at the beginning of the twentieth century in Paris. With the growth of urban centers during the nineteenth century, newly independent women could find meeting places, such as bars, social clubs, and salons, which were safely anonymous. For some, the "sexual undergrounds" of New York, Berlin, and Paris—the latter vividly portrayed by Toulouse-Lautrec—offered a welcome respite from the moralism of the dominant culture.

For others, the literary movement of modernism provided new forms through which to express the radical changes occurring in attitudes toward sexuality and gender.¹¹

Of particular importance to the development of a self-conscious lesbian literary tradition was the group of economically-privileged and artistically-inclined women centered in Paris around the expatriate authors Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien.¹² From classical mythology, biblical stories, historical examples, and the feminist ideology of their era, Barney and Vivien fashioned an image of lesbians as extraordinary and superior creatures possessing a unique sensitivity to life and literature. In particular, they seized upon Sappho—who had recaptured public imagination in 1892 when archaeologists discovered fragments of previously unknown poems—as their inspiration and model. Barney and Vivien explicitly identified themselves as Sappho's heirs, and, in their lives and their texts, tried to re-establish her circle of women-loving poets. Many of Vivien's erotic poems, which initiated self-defined lesbian writing, are responses to and rewritings of her great precursor, Sappho.

But Renée Vivien (like Djuna Barnes, author of the modernist classic *Nightwood* [1936]), borrowed her image of Sappho and lesbians from the exotic "femme damnée," intoxicated with death and lust, of the Symbolist poets Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Pierre Louÿs. Vivien's version of lesbianism thus oscillates between exquisite damnation (the tone of Colette's depiction of Vivien in *The Pure and the Impure* [1932]) and astonishing feminism, the latter most notable in her philosophical novella, *A Woman Appeared to Me* (1904).

Nonetheless, Vivien was noteworthy for her unambiguous inscriptions of lesbian sexuality and identity. Many other serious writers of that era—such as Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Angelina Weld Grimké, Amy Lowell, and Willa Cather—relied instead upon codes and subterfuge to express lesbian desire, a strategy that protected them from censure. By suppressing pronouns, changing the gender of characters, inventing a cryptic language for sexuality, or hinting obliquely at relationships between women, these writers could tell, but not quite tell, lesbian stories. Through codes, Woolf could evoke lesbian love ecstatically in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and whimsically in *Orlando* (1928), a

fantasy portrait of her lover, author Vita Sackville-West. Stein, a significant role model for contemporary lesbian writers, wrote (but never published) *Q.E.D.* (1903), a realistic novella about a lesbian triangle, and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), which clearly portrays the domestic side of her relationship with Toklas. But to write about sexuality and passion, Stein created an elaborate private code in texts like "Lifting Belly" (1915–17) and "A Sonatina Followed By Another" (1921).

Natalie Barney, virtually unique in her era, declined both the damnation of Renée Vivien and the codes of Gertrude Stein. She survives today not through her writing—plays and epigrams which have yet to be translated and published in any significant number—but through the representations of her life by other writers. Her most significant manifestation is as Valerie Seymour in the classic lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), by Radclyffe Hall. Valerie offers a welcome relief from the tortured self-hatred of the hero, Stephen Gordon, that wounded male soul trapped in a woman's body. It is ironic that Hall, a writer of modest talents compared to her illustrious contemporaries, should have created the novel and hero that have had the most profound and lasting influence on modern-day notions of lesbians. Yet, for all its old-fashioned rhetoric about "inversion" and its stylistic infelicities, *The Well of Loneliness* never obscures its central premise: that homosexuals deserve a place within nature and society. It is, moreover, an old-fashioned, readable novel with a strong plot, a noble and martyred hero, sharply-defined secondary characters, plentiful romance, and a tearjerker ending. It was shocking enough to be condemned by moralists, apologetic enough to be approved by sympathetic liberals, and explicit enough to be eagerly welcomed by lesbians. Hence, for over forty years, *The Well of Loneliness* and Stephen Gordon virtually defined lesbianism.

Shortly after its publication, *The Well of Loneliness* was condemned as obscene and officially banned in Britain until the 1960s. This was but the first sign of the periodic waves of repression that would attempt to wipe lesbians and gay men out of public consciousness and even existence. The Stalinist era in the Soviet Union effectively reversed the liberatory policies enacted during the early years of the Russian Revolution; for example, homosexuality was recriminalized in 1934. The contempo-

aneous Nazi movement went far further by destroying thriving gay communities throughout Europe, sending myriads of gay men and lesbians into exile or concentration camps.

On the cultural front, the situation was more mixed. Tightening moral standards throughout the 1930s rendered lesbianism so invisible in the mass media that the first film version of Lillian Hellman's famous 1934 play, *The Children's Hour*, eliminated the accusation of lesbianism around which the plot revolves. But lesbianism remained an acceptable, even popular, literary subject. Many novels published during the 1930s deserve a place in literary and lesbian history, among them the aforementioned *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *Nightwood*, and *The Pure and the Impure*, Vita Sackville-West's *The Dark Island* (1934), Dorothy Richardson's *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931), Gale Wilhelm's *We Too Are Drifting* (1935) and *Torchlight to Valhalla* (1938), and Christa Winsloe's *The Child Manuela* (1933; a novel based on her play and film, *Mädchen in Uniform*). Jeannette Foster's 1956 classic, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, surveys dozens of other novels, plays, and stories by male and heterosexual female writers that depict lesbians at length or in passing. Most of these, however, were strongly laced with the homophobic stereotypes of predatory, masculine, infantile, or hopelessly unhappy lesbians that were the legacy of early twentieth-century writing.

In the United States after World War II, Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities identified homosexuals, along with communists and liberals, as subversives. The resulting purges of suspected homosexuals from government service inspired similar witch-hunts in virtually every sector of society throughout North America and Europe. Retaliation against known homosexuals was certain, swift, and brutal. Stories of those days record how gay people lost their jobs and homes, suffered incarceration in mental institutions and prisons, and endured violent attacks in the streets and bars. Lesbians and gay men lived double lives, always fearing exposure, except for the few political activists and overt "butches" and "queens" who, by their choice of lifestyle, were forced to the margins of society. Although the 1950s also saw the formation of gay and lesbian organizations, such as the Mattachine Society and The Daughters of Bilitis, the years between *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and the rise of gay liberation (1969) were bleak ones indeed. Nonetheless, hidden, underground gay communities survived

in large urban centers. Centered around bars and private friendship networks, they formed a subculture that, as the language of the time reminds us, existed "in the shadows" or "in the twilight world," but not in the bright, open light of day.¹³

Perhaps because lesbian life was so hidden during those decades, the written word was crucial to sustaining and promoting lesbian identity. More lesbian novels were published in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s than at any other time in history. Most, however, were pulp paperbacks that depicted lesbians as tragic, maimed creatures trapped in a world of alcohol, violence, and meaningless sex. The plots either doomed them to a cycle of unhappy love affairs or redeemed them through heterosexual marriage. Many of these novels were soft-core pornography written by men for men. Those written by women (whether lesbian or not) seldom challenged the insidious conventions and formulas, although occasionally an author revealed an affirmative and subversive subtext beneath the homophobic surface. Ann Bannon, in her Beebo Brinker series, created several strong lesbian characters, while Valerie Taylor gave her protagonist, Erika Frohmann, surprisingly feminist attitudes. Whatever their quality or perspective, however, the pulp novels were read avidly by lesbians and reviewed seriously in *The Ladder*, the one lesbian journal of that era.¹⁴

These pulp paperbacks were crucial to the lesbian culture of the 1950s because they offered proof of lesbian existence. Any story that depicted a lesbian world, no matter how deeply submerged in the shadows, was valuable to a woman who otherwise felt herself to be alone. Moreover, the recurrent theme of suffering and sacrifice, as in *The Well of Loneliness*, invested a character with nobility, allowing the reader to feel, if not happy, at least purged and uplifted. The pulp novels also provided some women with welcome representations of lesbian sexuality and relationships. These women may have read against the grain, finding in the excesses and distortions of the text an ironic and amusing affirmation of their membership in a hidden and special subculture. Finally, the best of these stories portrayed lesbians as strong and independent women, and thus indicated the feminist direction that lesbian politics and literature were to take.

Serious and substantial fiction also emerged in the 1950s and 60s, bridging the gap between the great modernist writers of the 1920s and

1930s—Woolf, Barnes, and Stein—and the explicitly feminist literature of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Catharine Stimpson, in her essay on the twentieth-century lesbian novel, identifies Mary McCarthy's best-seller, *The Group* (1963), as a turning point in public consciousness because its appealing lesbian character, Lakey, breaks with the stereotypes of the past.¹⁵ I would point to two other, less mainstream, novels that have a central place in the development of a lesbian literary tradition. *The Price of Salt* (1952) by Clare Morgan and *Desert of the Heart* (1964) by Jane Rule, both sensitive and dignified novels in the tradition of the 1950s romance, demonstrated how lesbian fiction, freed from the stereotypes and narrative conventions of the past, might determine its own voice. Unlike the tragic or childish characters in most pulp paperbacks, the lesbian lovers in these novels are complex characters who make choices for themselves. Although they struggle with their identities and their place in society, they are permitted satisfying and authentic endings. These novels, and a handful of others, such as May Sarton's *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965) and Maureen Duffy's *The Microcosm* (1966), signaled the beginning of an entirely different way of writing about lesbians.

In 1969, Alma Routson's *A Place for Us*, or *Patience and Sarah* was published. *A Place for Us* came into the world quietly and would not have had its current significance had it not been for the political and social events transforming western societies during the 1960s and 1970s. Lesbian life and literature was never the same after this time.

Lesbian Feminism and Lesbian Culture

In 1969, the hidden gay world exploded into the open when drag queens and dykes at a Greenwich Village bar, the Stonewall Inn, fought back against one police raid too many. Gay liberation was born that night into a political arena already established by the civil rights movement, the new left, the anti-war movement and the emerging women's liberation movement. Very quickly, lesbians within gay liberation and women's liberation coalesced into what came to be called lesbian liberation, and later lesbian feminism. Although not the first generation to openly proclaim their lesbianism, the women who came of age during the 1960s were able to establish the most dynamic and pervasive sense of

lesbian cultural identity ever recorded. More than any group of lesbians in history, we (for I belong to this generation) insisted upon our right to say who we are, what we think and feel, how we live and love.

Many factors combined to make this transformation possible. The first was the sheer number and variety of women—bar dykes, college students, housewives, working women—who initially sought out lesbian organizations and social events. These numbers provided clear evidence that we were a distinct and potentially powerful group. Furthermore, the example of Black nationalism spurred many groups, lesbians being just one among them, to solidify their cultural identities. The process of separating from women's liberation or gay liberation groups also intensified our perception of ourselves as a group. Political activism, as well, bonded lesbians together. And, perhaps most important of all, feminist ideas, like ripples spreading out on water, eventually touched most lesbian communities and all lesbian creativity.

Those of us who began to identify as lesbian feminists asked anew the simple question, who or what is a lesbian? One answer is that lesbians are women who love and desire women rather than men. For some women that is definition and identity enough, but for lesbian feminists in the early 1970s, it was only a starting point. We argued that when women commit their passion and attention to other women, we defy society's most fundamental expectations and prohibitions for female behavior. Hence, lesbian feminists evolved a political or metaphoric sense of what it means to be a lesbian.

The theory or political position of lesbian feminism combined a commitment to female integrity, bonding, and sexual passion with an uncompromising rejection of male-centered ways of thinking and being. In place of these old ways, lesbian feminism presented a perspective from the margins of patriarchal society, a point of view rooted in women's forbidden love and desire for one another. Lesbian feminists proposed, therefore, that the word "lesbian" stood for a specific relationship to the dominant society rather than simply being a name for women who "happen" to make love to other women.

The first such use of "lesbian" can be found in a manifesto written in 1970 by the Radicalesbians collective, "The Woman Identified Woman," which defined the lesbian as "the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." To French theorist and writer Monique Wit-

tig, "lesbian" signified that which disrupts western patriarchal and heterosexual dualism. The lesbian does so because she lives outside the rule of the fathers, because she is, as Bertha Harris put it, an outlaw and monster. Critic Mary Carruthers further argued that in lesbian poetry (and, as we shall see, in lesbian fiction as well):

The word *lesbian* encapsulates a myth of women together and separate from men. . . . *Lesbian* is also the essential outsider, woman alone and integral, who is oppressed and despised by traditional society, yet thereby free to use her position to re-form and remember. . . . *Lesbian* is also erotic connection, the primary energy of the senses which is both physical and intellectual, connecting women, a woman with herself, and women through time. Finally, *lesbian* signifies a change of relationships, radical internal transformation; it is a myth of psychic rebirth, social redemption, and apocalypse.¹⁶

To all these writers, the word "lesbian" represented a point of view, or mode of interpretation, rather than a sexual behavior or innate identity. In the late 1980s, some lesbians, including a number of novelists, replaced this expansive political definition with the more specific sexual definition of lesbianism. But during the 1970s and early 1980s, the meaning of the word "lesbian" was profoundly influenced by feminist politics and ideology.

In the process of creating this feminist point of view, contemporary lesbians shaped a distinctive lesbian, or lesbian feminist, culture.¹⁷ The term "culture," as I use it, refers to more than literature, music, theater, and art, although the production of these creative forms has been one of the most notable activities of the lesbian community. Culture also encompasses the ideals and ethos of a group, all the intangibles that distinguish it from other groups. In the words of critics Billie Wahlstrom and Caren Deming, culture "limits and organizes human experiences. It does so by providing a version of reality that guarantees the shared meanings necessary for social existence."¹⁸

Unlike many other social groups, lesbians, as we have seen, have had a difficult time establishing a "version of reality" that makes sense of our experiences *to us*. Lesbian existence has been so shrouded in "lies, secrets, and silence," to borrow Adrienne Rich's phrase, that we have struggled mightily to establish those "shared meanings."¹⁹ The events of 1969

broke the silence surrounding lesbian existence and thus stimulated the creation of the group identity that Bertha Harris, in 1976, named as a requirement for a distinctly lesbian literature. That identity was shaped in accordance with feminist beliefs and further refined by our artistic endeavors.

Feminism, in every historical era, emphasizes the right of women to develop their own voice and speak (or write) about their own reality. Accordingly, the creation of a lesbian feminist identity has gone hand-in-hand with the creation of specific cultural artifacts, such as novels. Between 1969 and 1978 lesbian writers, invigorated by political radicalism and literary experimentation, set out the premises of a new genre. Many of them consciously hearkened back to lesbian writers of earlier decades: Bertha Harris to Djuna Barnes, Monique Wittig to Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, Jill Johnston to Gertrude Stein, and June Arnold to Virginia Woolf. Elana Nachmann (who later renamed herself Elana Dykewomon) and Sharon Isabell wrestled with the legacy of Radclyffe Hall, while Jane Rule and Isabel Miller emerged from the lesbian romance genre of the 1950s. Some of them fashioned their stories directly out of the materials of their own lives; others created an imaginative and daring language unique to this period in contemporary lesbian literary history. Together, they created an audience for the coming out stories, romances, and utopias that have been the staple forms of lesbian fiction ever since.

These lesbian writers, along with artists, musicians, political theorists, and myriads of unnamed women, deliberately and self-consciously established a sense of continuity with lesbians of the past and community among lesbians in the present. This community—or Lesbian Nation—possesses, in the words of Monique Wittig, "its own literature, its own painting, music, codes of language, codes of social relations, codes of dress, its own mode of work."²⁰ Wittig goes on to claim that this lesbian community and culture is diverse and international: "Just as they are unlimited by national frontiers (the lesbian nation is everywhere), so lesbians come from all social categories."

While Wittig's claim is theoretically compelling, in reality this lesbian culture has been embraced so far primarily by white western women. Lesbian culture is not delineated by actual geographical bound-

aries, which may explain why the territorial metaphor of Lesbian Nation is so widely used. We do not have a common language, although lesbian "wimmin" love to play with etymology, creating new words and original spellings.²¹ Nor is lesbian identity established through a shared birth heritage; lesbians "come out" rather than being born into a culture as African-Americans or Jews may be. No matter what your desires are at age two or twelve, you still must choose to act upon your feelings and identify with the community.

Lesbian culture is like a philosophical or religious system that provides its adherents with a way of viewing the world anew. A Jew, Christian, or Moslem, for example, finds a ready-made mythology, history, literature, and ethos waiting for her. For the past fifteen to twenty years, lesbians have been constructing a similar cultural identity from existing traditions, lifestyles, myths, and stories. We mix together Sappho, amazons, Gertrude Stein, and Natalie Barney (who herself manipulated and recreated myths and symbols); add bar culture from the fifties; season liberally with new left politics and new age consciousness; strain through traditional literary metaphors; and cover over completely with feminism to produce a lesbian culture. Today when a woman comes out as a lesbian, she has an identity and belief system waiting for her should she choose to embrace it.

Defining Lesbian Fiction

Among the products of lesbian culture is the flourishing genre of lesbian fiction. What defines this genre? What do we mean by "lesbian writing" and "lesbian writer"? Like the category "women's literature," "lesbian literature" is not defined by inherent, static characteristics that can be easily and uniformly identified and agreed upon, but by the perspective of a community of writers and readers. The boundaries of the genre are and always will be fluid, since writers may enter or leave and readers may disagree over its exact perimeters. "Lesbian" is not an ethnic or national designation, nor is it a stylistic or historical one, although it combines elements of each.

Instead, lesbian writing can best be defined through a *cluster* of factors; if a writer or text exhibits enough specific characteristics we can call her or it "lesbian." The factors vary according to historical era; what

identifies a lesbian in 1980 may differ from what did so in 1880 or 1930. Keeping in mind that this book covers the period from roughly 1969 to 1989, the following are the factors I use to identify lesbian writing.

The first is the writer herself, for the nature of lesbian fiction makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it.²² Lesbian writers, unlike those writers who incorporate a lesbian character or lesbian scene in a novel, are women who identify themselves in some way with the lesbian community.²³ They may identify themselves as lesbians in their creative writing (by stressing autobiographical elements, for example) or in biographies or interviews. They may do so through their choice of publisher, since certain presses are exclusively or primarily lesbian or gay. They may publish their works in lesbian journals, give readings at lesbian bookstores and centers, or attend lesbian panels at conferences.

Since writers do not always leave obvious clues to their identity, we next turn to the literary text itself. A lesbian novel has a central, not marginal, lesbian character, one who understands herself to be a lesbian. In fact, it has many or mostly lesbian characters; it revolves primarily around lesbian histories. A lesbian novel also places love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of its story. Fiction that inscribes relationships between women through codes and allusions does not belong in the genre of self-defined lesbian literature. A contemporary lesbian novel very often exhibits lesbian intertextuality; that is, it refers to famous lesbians of the past and present, to lesbian events such as music festivals, and to other lesbian books. It also expresses a women-centered point of view. Unlike heterosexual feminist literature (which also may be very women-centered), a lesbian text places men firmly at the margins of the story.

Third, I include audience reception—who reads the books, and for what purpose—as part of this definition. Lesbian novels are read by lesbians in order to affirm lesbian existence. Conversely, the books a woman reads are what make her a lesbian feminist, or a member of "the lesbian community." Lesbian fictions function like the coming out stories that Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan Wolfe describe; they "are the foundation of our lives as Lesbians, as real to ourselves; as such, our sharing of them defines us as participants in Lesbian culture, as members of a community."²⁴