

Toward a Global History of Same-Sex Sexuality

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THIS IS THE presumptuous title of a paper I delivered for what I believe was the first-ever session on “Gay and Lesbian History/L’histoire de l’homo-sexualité” at the International Congress of Historical Sciences, held in August 2000 in Oslo. As I did there, let me hasten to say here that I do not claim knowledge of same-sex sexuality in every time and every place. But the blossoming of research on a wide range of manifestations of same-sex sexuality calls for an attempt at global thinking. Although my own work is rooted in U.S. and European history, I would like to make use of the work of scholars focusing on different parts of the world to reflect on what patterns might emerge. I take up this task from the perspective of one firmly committed to a social constructionist perspective on sexuality. Thus, I recognize that making transhistorical comparisons can be a risky business. Nevertheless, I think we can learn something by thinking about same-sex sexuality from a global viewpoint.

I favor the term “same-sex sexuality” as one that gets beyond the use of terms such as “queer,” “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual.” Yet I would like to proceed by looking at manifestations of what we call “same-sex sexuality” in different times and places both to explore global patterns and to consider how those patterns make the two parts of the term “same-sex sexuality” problematic. That is, sometimes such manifestations cannot really be considered “same-sex,” and sometimes they should not really be labeled “sexuality.” These complications suggest that even the attempt to avoid assumptions about the meanings of desires, acts, and relationships by using a term such as “same-sex sexuality” may inadvertently lump together phenomena that are quite different. This is the difficulty of thinking about a global history of same-sex sexuality.

There are various ways that sexual acts involving two genitally alike bodies may in fact not be best conceptualized as “same-sex.” In some cases, what is more important than genital similarity is the fact of some

kind of difference: age difference, class difference, gender difference. As numerous scholars have pointed out, across time and space those differences have in more cases than not structured what we call same-sex acts in ways that are far more important to the people involved and to the societies in which they lived than the mere fact of the touching of similar bodies.¹ (My favorite way to explain this to my students is through the story of my colleague's five-year-old son, who was one day playing with the family dog and a girl from his school. The girl said, "I love Lily [the dog] so much I wish I could marry her. But I can't because she's a girl." My colleague's son, viewing the relevant categories in a different way, responded, "That's not the reason you can't marry Lily. You can't marry Lily because she's a dog!") Looking at the whole question of sameness and difference from an entirely different angle, Jens Rydström's work on homosexuality and bestiality in rural Sweden reminds us that these two categories of deviant acts were not conceptually distinct in the past.² Thus, the lines between same-sex and different-species acts were not clearly drawn.

To start, probably the most familiar example is from ancient Athenian society where age difference between older and younger men determined the ways they engaged in sex acts, and such relationships had educative functions that were as much the point as the sex. Furthermore (although this is a bit controversial), the lack of an age or other differential was considered deviant, while same-sex and different-age (or different-status) relationships were not. Adult male citizens of Athens could penetrate social inferiors, including women, boys, foreigners, and slaves.³ The privilege of

¹Stephen O. Murray, "Homosexual Categorization in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Latin American Male Homosexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 3–32, cites a number of schemes for the social structuring of homosexuality and adopts that of Barry Adam, "Age, Structure, and Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11 (1986): 19–33. This includes age-structured, gender-defined, profession-defined, and egalitarian. In Murray's most recent book, *Homosexualities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), he includes "profession-defined" under "gender-defined." John Howard, in his comment on the paper I delivered at Oslo, added race and ethnicity to this list, citing Nayan Shah's work on Indian and Chinese men arrested in British Columbia for their sexual relations with Anglo-Canadian men, and his own work on African American and white same-sex interactions in the U.S. South. See Nayan Shah, "The Race of Sodomy: Asian Men, White Boys, and the Policing of Sex in North America" (paper presented at the Organization of American Historians conference, St. Louis, April 2000); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²Jens Rydström, "Beasts and Beauties: Bestiality and Male Homosexuality in Rural Sweden, 1880–1950" (paper presented at the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Oslo, Norway, August 2000).

³The classic work is K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1978). More recent studies include Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Eva Cantarella,

elite men to penetrate anyone other than their equals lingered on into early modern Europe. “Missing my whore, I bugger my page,” wrote the Earl of Rochester in Restoration England.⁴ Were such men “bisexual,” or was the whole notion of sexual object choice irrelevant? Was this “same-sex sex”? Or are such relations or acts best described as “different-status sex”?

We find examples of age differences structuring sexual acts in other parts of the world as well. In seventeenth-century Japan, men expected to desire sexual relations with both women and boys.⁵ Two different words described love of women and love of boys. Styles of dress and distinct haircuts differentiated youths from men, thus creating visible categories of difference based on age. When a youth became a man, ceremonially donning the proper garment and having his forelocks shaved, he would cease his role as the anally penetrated partner and take on the adult male penetrator role in a new relationship.

Yet age itself could become a socially constructed category. That is, although it was a violation of the norms, men might keep the boy role well past youth. In *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, a collection of short stories published in Japan in 1687, “Two Old Cherry Trees Still in Bloom” tells of two samurai lovers in their sixties who had first met when one was

Bisexuality in the Ancient World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); and Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, eds., *Homosexuality in the Ancient World* (New York: Garland, 1992). See also Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). John Boswell, “Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 17–36, disputes the notion that an age or status difference was essential to same-sex relations in Athenian society, and, more recently, Murray, in *Homosexualities*, has argued that undifferentiated (what he calls “egalitarian”) relationships between men existed in ancient Greece and Rome (as well as in other premodern places) and that age difference did not always determine sexual role.

⁴Quoted in James M. Saslow, “Homosexuality in the Renaissance: Behavior, Identity, and Artistic Expression,” in *Hidden From History*, 90–105, quotation on 92. See Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York: Viking, 1999); Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds., *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁵Paul Gordon Schalow, ed., *The Great Mirror of Male Love* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Stephen O. Murray, “Male Homosexuality in Japan before the Meiji Restoration,” in *Oceanic Homosexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray (New York: Garland, 1992), 363–70; Gary P. Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

sixteen and the other nineteen. “Han’emon still thought of Mondo as a boy of sixteen. Though his hair was thinning and had turned completely white, Mondo sprinkled it with ‘Blossom Dew’ hair oil and bound it up in a double-folded topknot anyway. . . . There was no sign that he had ever shaved his temples; he still had the rounded hairline he was born with.”⁶ John Boswell, who vehemently denied that age difference structured male same-sex relations in ancient Athens and the Roman Empire, suggests that the term “boy” might simply mean “beautiful man” or one who was beloved.⁷ Boswell took this to signify that age difference was irrelevant, but it is also possible that this means, as in Japan, that age difference was crucial but that the concept of age might be only loosely tied, or not tied at all, to the number of years a person had lived.

In some societies, transgenerational same-sex relations are thoroughly institutionalized. We know the most about a number of cultures in New Guinea in which boys cannot grow into men without incorporating the semen of older men into their bodies, either through oral sex, anal sex, or simply smearing it on the skin.⁸ Such “boy-inseminating rituals” transmit life-giving semen, which produces masculinity and a warrior personality. What is critical here is that all boys take part in the ritual, and once they become men (sometimes through marriage, sometimes through fathering a child), they take on the adult role. Different cultures prescribe different lengths of time for such same-sex relations, different rules for which men should penetrate which boys (sometimes a mother’s brother, sometimes a sister’s husband), and different ways to transmit the semen.

Note that almost all of the information we have about age-differentiated relationships is about men. True, the construction of Sappho as the mistress of a girls’ school falling in love with her students hints at age difference, but this seems a bit far-fetched.⁹ Martha Vicinus and Karin Lützen have both told tales about passion between students and teachers in English and Danish schools in the nineteenth century, but this is still a far cry from the evidence about men.¹⁰ Perhaps more comparable is a ritual among the

⁶Quoted in Paul Gordon Schalow, “Male Love in Early Modern Japan: A Literary Depiction of the ‘Youth,’” in *Hidden from History*, 118–28, quotation on 126.

⁷John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 28–30.

⁸David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 26–40; Gilbert Herdt, *Same Sex, Different Cultures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 64–88; Murray, *Oceanic Homosexualities*.

⁹See Judith P. Hallett, “Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4: 447–64 (1979).

¹⁰Martha Vicinus, “Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9: 600–622 (1984); Karin Lützen, *Was das Herz begehrt: Liebe und Freundschaft zwischen Frauen* (Hamburg, Germany: Ernst Kabel Verlag, 1990).

Baruya in Melanesia in which lactating mothers nourish young girls who are not their own daughters by offering a breast, believing that breast milk is produced from men's semen and thus essential to womanhood.¹¹ A young girl at the breast, however, is reminiscent of motherhood, while a boy enclosing a penis has nothing to do with traditional men's roles. A more convincing, if still very sketchy, example can be found in Big Nambas society in the New Hebrides, where higher-ranking women took younger girls as sexual partners.¹²

The point here, of course, is that our construction of these interactions as same-sex may be totally foreign to the people involved. That is even more true for transgendered relations, which can be found in a variety of cultures throughout history and around the globe. For a number of reasons—spiritual, political, economic, social, cultural—individuals take on (or are forced to take on) the social role, dress, and other markers of the (here our language fails us) “other” sex. Sexual relations may then occur between biological males of female gender and biological males of male gender, or biological females of male gender and biological females of female gender. (Here again, our language describes just two genders where other cultures may see three or more.) Such “gender-transformed relationships” can be found in many parts of the world.

We know the most about transgendered relations among North American native peoples. The term “berdache,” a derogatory French word bestowed by the horrified European invaders, emphasized the sexual aspects of the role, but in fact the spiritual characteristics of what some scholars now call the “two-spirit person” were sometimes more important.¹³ The male transgendered role could be found in over a hundred American Indian tribes, the female in about thirty.¹⁴ Among the Mohave Indians in the western United States, both male (*alyha*) and female (*hwame*) two-spirit roles existed. A two-spirit male would take a female name, engage in female occupations, and even enact menstruation and childbirth. “Manly-hearted women” would take on male characteristics and have children with their wives through adoption. Men-women sought orgasm through

¹¹Greenberg, *Construction of Homosexuality*, 29.

¹²Herdt, *Same-Sex, Different Cultures*, 86.

¹³Herdt, *Same-Sex, Different Cultures*, 90–102; Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). There is disagreement about the status of transgendered individuals in the Americas. For a contrary view to those cited above, see Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁴Herdt, *Same Sex, Different Cultures*, 91.

anal sex, while women-men engaged in tribadism or genital rubbing, with the two-spirit on top.¹⁵

Third-gender roles also existed in a number of Polynesian societies. From the late eighteenth century, European explorers and missionaries commented on men dressed as women who were sexually involved with men in Tahiti. *Mahus*, as they are known, according to an English missionary, “chose this vile way of life when young; putting on the dress of a woman they follow the same employments, are under the same prohibitions with respect to food, etc., and seek the courtship of men as women do, nay are more jealous of the men who cohabit with them, and always refuse to sleep with women.”¹⁶ More recently, *mahus* tend to be effeminate and interested in women’s household tasks but do not dress entirely as women. They seek oral sex with men, who may ridicule them in public but also seek them out for fellatio.

Other examples of transgender relations involve transformation of the body in some way. The *hijras* of India are defined by their sexual impotence with women.¹⁷ Some are born hermaphrodites, but others simply lack desire for women and as a result undergo the surgical removal of their male genitals. They wear women’s clothes and hairstyles, imitate women’s walk and talk, and prefer male sexual partners. But they also exaggerate femininity and exhibit an aggressive sexuality that is unlike that of Indian women. They also have religious and ceremonial functions, performing at marriages and the birth of male children and serving as servants of Matar, the Mother goddess, at her temples. This is not to say that this is a high-status role in Indian society, for the *hijras* are much despised.

Not all cases of transgender relations have spiritual or religious origins or implications. The *travestis* of Brazil are transgendered prostitutes who, beginning at a young age, take female names and wear women’s clothes as a result of their desire to attract men.¹⁸ Although they do not, like the *hijras*, remove their genitals, they do take female hormones and inject silicone in order to enlarge their buttocks, thighs, and breasts. They work as prostitutes, attracting men who define themselves as resolutely heterosexual.

In the case of women who passed as men in early modern Europe, the motivation may have been a desire for occupational or literal mobility, although this is undoubtedly something we will never know for sure.¹⁹

¹⁵Herd, *Same Sex, Different Cultures*, 92–94.

¹⁶Quoted in Greenberg, *Construction of Homosexuality*, 58. See also Raleigh Watts, “The Polynesian Mahu,” in Murray, *Oceanic Homosexualities*, 171–84.

¹⁷Serena Nanda, “Hijras: An Alternative Sex and Gender Role in India,” in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 373–417.

¹⁸Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁹See Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989).

Women who dressed in men's clothing in order to join the army or take a man's job had to impersonate men in all ways, including in their relations with women. When discovered, punishment could be swift and severe for the usurpation of male privilege, particularly if it involved the use of what were called "material instruments" to "counterfeit the office of a husband," as a 1566 case put it.²⁰ In Germany in the early eighteenth century, a woman named Catharine Margaretha Linck dressed as a man, served in the army, and, after discharge, worked as a cotton dyer. She married a woman who, following a quarrel, confessed to her mother that her husband was not what he seemed. When the outraged mother took Linck to court and produced what another trial transcript in a similar case described as "the illicit inventions she used to supplement the shortcomings of her sex," Linck was sentenced to death for her crimes.²¹ Were women who risked death looking only for better job prospects, or were these gender-crossers what we would today consider transgendered?

The connection between women's cross-dressing and same-sex desire becomes tighter over time. Lisa Duggan, in her analysis of the case of Alice Mitchell, a nineteen-year-old Memphis woman who murdered the girl she loved when their plans to elope came to naught, ties together the threads of romantic friendship, gender transgression, and the emerging definitions of lesbianism.²² Jennifer Robertson's pathbreaking work on cross-dressing women in the Japanese Takarazuka Revue, founded in 1913, does much the same thing in a very different context. Exploring a rash of lesbian double suicides in Japan in the 1930s, Robertson details the erotics of fandom inspired by the Revue.²³ Like Duggan and Robertson, Lucy Chesser, in her dissertation on cross-dressing in Australia, shows the development over time of the idea that cross-dressing had something to do with same-sex desire.²⁴

The point of all these examples is, once again, that sexual relations between two genitally alike (or originally alike) bodies are in many cases better defined as different-gender than same-sex relations. This seems clear in the case of two-spirit people or the *hijras* or *travestis*, but as the spectrum of

²⁰Quoted in Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 51.

²¹Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 51–52.

²²Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

²³Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jennifer Robertson, "Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25: 1–36 (1999).

²⁴Lucy Sarah Chesser, "'Parting with My Sex for a Season': Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life, 1850–1920," (Ph.D. diss., La Trobe University, 2001). See also Lucy Chesser, "'A Woman Who Married Three Wives': Management of Disruptive Knowledge in the 1879 Australian Case of Edward De Lacy Evans," *Journal of Women's History* 9: 53–77 (winter 1998).

transgendered relations moves from those who alter their bodies to those who simply take on some characteristics traditionally associated with the other/another gender, the lines get blurry. What about the “mollies” of eighteenth-century London? Like men in subcultures in other large European cities, including Paris and Amsterdam, “mollies” were effeminate men who frequented taverns, parks, and public latrines; sought out male sexual partners; and shared a style of feminine dress and behavior.²⁵ An agent of the English Societies for the Reformation of Manners entered a London club in 1714 and found men “calling one another my dear, hugging and kissing, tickling and feeling each other, as if they were a mixture of wanton males and females; and assuming effeminate voices, female airs.”²⁶ What about the “roaring girls” of London or the “randy women” of Amsterdam, cross-dressed but not entirely? Mary Frith, known by her pseudonym, Moll Cutpurse, the model for a number of early-seventeenth-century English accounts, struck one observer as “both man and woman.”²⁷ Examples of gender-differentiated pairings—the *bichas* (faggots) and *bofes* (real men) of Brazil, the *jotas* (homosexuals) and *mayates* (men who have sex with *jotas*) of Mexico City, the butches and fems of 1950s American bar culture, the “mine wives” and “husbands” of South Africa—can be found in many parts of the world, and how much they are perceived within their own cultures as different-gender and how much as same-sex is a tricky question.²⁸

In the narrowest sense, then, “same-sex sexuality” may best refer to modern Western notions of relations between individuals undifferentiated by gender, age, class, or any other factors: in other words, those (or

²⁵Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700–1830* (London: GMP Publishers, 1992); Michael Rey, “Parisian Homosexuals Create a Lifestyle, 1700–1750: The Police Archives,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 9, new series 3: 179–91 (1985); Jeffrey Merrick, “Sodomitical Scandals and Subcultures in the 1720s,” *Men and Masculinities* 1: 365–84 (April 1999); Arend H. Huussen, Jr., “Sodomy in the Dutch Republic during the Eighteenth Century,” *Unauthorized Sexual Behavior during the Enlightenment*, ed. Robert P. Maccubbin (Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary Press, 1985), 169–78.

²⁶Randolph Trumbach, “The Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660–1750,” in *Hidden from History*, 129–40, quotation on 137. See also Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁷Quoted in Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 57. “Randy women” is a rough translation of *lollepotten*, a term analyzed by Myriam Everard in “Ziel en zinnen: Over liefde en lust tussen vrouwen in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw” (Ph.D. diss., Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1994).

²⁸See James N. Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Annick Prieur, *Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

some of those) who adopt a “gay” or “lesbian” identity. That is an irony of a term designed to do just the opposite.

The second part of my critique of the term “same-sex sexuality” is already implicit here. That is, how do we determine what is “sexuality” and what is something else in these different interactions? Scholars have argued that “sexuality” itself is a relatively modern concept, that, for example, acts of fellatio or anal penetration in ancient Athens were expressions of power, acts of domination and submission, not “sexuality.”²⁹ In the case of the Sambia boys in New Guinea who ingest semen through acts of fellatio on older men, we can ask, “Is that a sexual act? Or akin to taking vitamins?” Is it significant that the boys swallow the semen directly from a penis rather than from a bowl with a spoon?³⁰

How can we know for sure what is a sexual act? There are really two questions here. How do we think about acts—such as fellatio, cunnilingus, anal penetration—that seem clearly sexual yet may have other meanings? What do we make of acts—such as kissing, hugging, cuddling—that may or may not be considered “sex”? These questions in turn raise a third: Are certain acts associated with specific forms of relationships?

We have already considered the possibility that fellatio and a girl’s mouth on the breast of a woman not her mother may be about a kind of spiritual nutrition rather than sexuality; and even that a whole range of acts might be the assertion of elite male privilege, a sign of power. Some scholars argue that particular acts—especially anal penetration—carry meanings that are far more about power than sex and did so even before the advent of the concept “sexuality.” Richard Trexler, for example, interprets the cross-gender male role in the Americas at the time of conquest as just another form of a long-lasting practice of men dominating other men by raping them, either literally or symbolically.³¹ Eva Keuls, in her study of sexual politics in ancient Athens, argues that anal intercourse was an “initiatory rite of submission to the desires of the established class,” an assertion of superiority rather than a source of pleasure. Agreeing with Trexler, Keuls asserts that “anal sex is charged with aggression and domination: the submitting partner is in a helpless position, penetration can be painful, and opportunity for the gratification of the passive participant is limited.”³² If these are accurate conclusions (and I know that a chorus of voices will be

²⁹David M. Halperin, “Sex before Sexuality: Pederasty, Politics, and Power in Classical Athens,” in *Hidden from History*, 37–53.

³⁰This is a point made by Carole S. Vance, “Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality,” in *Which Homosexuality?*, ed. Dennis Altman et al. (Amsterdam: Dekker/Schorer, 1989), 13–34. Vance credits a student with the incisive question about the bowl and spoon. On a Sambia man who sought out fellatio with initiates, see Gilbert H. Herdt, “Semen Depletion and the Sense of Maleness,” in Murray, *Oceanic Homosexualities*, 33–68.

³¹Trexler, *Sex and Conquest*.

³²Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus*, 276.

raised to shout that they are not!), can we think of such interactions as “same-sex sexuality” at all, or are they, rather, “same-sex domination”?

What about societies that make room for loving relations that seem sexual to outsiders but not to the participants? In Basotho society in contemporary Lesotho, girls and women exchange long kisses, putting their tongues in each others’ mouths; they fondle each other and endeavor to lengthen the labia minora; they rub their bodies together and engage in cunnilingus without defining any of this as sexual. They fall in love and form marriage-like unions. In this context sex requires a penis and marriage means sex with a man, so there is no such concept as lesbian sex or lesbian relationships.³³ Are these sexual acts?

Looking at the question of what constitutes a sexual act from a different angle, we are faced, most prominently, with the case of romantic friendship in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western world. One of the central debates in the history of sexuality focuses on whether or not these passionate, intense, loving, physically affectionate relationships between women (and, to a lesser extent, men) included sex. This raises in a direct way the question of whether some involvement of the genitals of at least one person is a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for the existence of a sexual act. Because romantic friendships could warrant public approval, even appreciation, we have traditionally assumed that they involved nothing that either the participants or observers defined as sex, largely because of the societal assumption of women’s lack of passion.³⁴ Thus, when twenty-nine-year-old married mother Sarah Butler Wister instructed Jeannie Field Musgrove, the friend she had met in school fifteen

³³Kendall, “‘When a Woman Loves a Woman’ in Lesotho: Love, Sex, and the (Western) Construction of Homophobia,” in Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, 223–41.

³⁴There is a great deal of disagreement about the acceptability of romantic friendships. See Liz Stanley, “Romantic Friendship? Some Issues in Researching Lesbian History and Biography,” *Women’s History Review* 1: 193–216 (1992); Lisa Moore, “‘Something More Tender Still Than Friendship’: Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England,” *Feminist Studies* 18: 499–520 (1992); Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,” *Feminist Studies* 18: 467–97 (1992); Emma Donoghue, *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668–1801* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993); Sylvia Martin, “‘These Walls of Flesh’: The Problem of the Body in the Romantic Friendship/Lesbianism Debate,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 20: 243–66 (1994); Marylynne Diggs, “Romantic Friends or a ‘Different Race of Creatures?’ The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Feminist Studies* 21: 317–40 (1995); Molly McGarry, Kanchana Natarajan, Dása Frančiková, Tania Navarro Swain, and Karin Lützen, “Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s ‘The Female World of Love and Ritual’ after Twenty-five Years,” *Journal of Women’s History* 12: 8–38 (2000). My argument, presented in “Romantic Friendship,” in *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida Black and John Howard (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, forthcoming), is that women could engage in quite passionate relationships without censure as long

years earlier, to “fill a quarter page with caresses & expressions of endearment” and Jeannie responded with “a thousand kisses”; or poet Emily Dickinson felt “hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast” at the prospect of seeing and kissing her friend Sue Gilbert, we call this “affection.”³⁵

Part of the problem of evaluating what counts as sex between women is that we have so little evidence of what women did with each other, in contrast to how they felt about each other. Some of this can be accounted for because religious and civil authorities—that is, male religious and civil authorities—could not really understand sex without a penis, so they were themselves never really sure what was taking place.

Consider the evidence we do have. Marie-Jo Bonnet has collected a range of images in European art from ancient times to the present, images of what she calls the “female couple,” many of them engaged in what look to be quite explicitly sexual encounters.³⁶ The question remains, however, what such representations mean. At the very least, they make female same-sex acts visible.

Potentially sexual activities between women fall into several different categories across time. In written as well as visual sources, one kind of act that we find is the caressing of breasts. A twelfth-century nun in the monastery of Tegernsee in Bavaria wrote to another nun, “When I recall the kisses you gave me, / And how with tender words you caressed my little breasts, / I want to die / Because I cannot see you.”³⁷ Centuries later across the Atlantic, Addie Brown, a domestic servant, and Rebecca Primus, a schoolteacher, both African American women who met in Hartford, Connecticut, in the 1860s, also engaged in what Karen Hansen calls “bosom sex.” Addie worked at a girls’ school and wrote Rebecca that the “girls are very friendly towards me. One of them wants to sleep with me. Perhaps I will give my consent some of these nights.” In response to Rebecca’s lost reply, Addie explained, “If you think that is my bosom that captivated the girl that made her want to sleep with me, she got sadly disappointed injoying it, for I had my back towards [her] all night and my

as they remained respectable by neither appearing masculine, rejecting men, nor seeming to have a relationship that would be defined as sexual.

³⁵Quoted in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (1): 1–29 (1975), quotation on 4–5; quoted in John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 126.

³⁶Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Les deux amies: Essai sur le couple de femmes dans l’art* (Paris: Éditions Blanche, 2000). See also Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Les relations amoureuses entre les femmes du XVIème au XXè siècle* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1995).

³⁷Quoted in Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 220.

night dress was buttoned up so she could not get to my bosom. I shall try to keep your favored one always for you. Should in my excitement forget [*sic*], you will pardon me I know." Like other romantic friends, and like the twelfth-century nuns, Rebecca and Addie also enjoyed kissing. "No kisses is like youres," Addie told Rebecca in another letter.³⁸

Then we also have some evidence of genital contact, either tribadism or manual stimulation of the clitoris and/or vagina. Judith Brown recounts the story of Benedetta Carlini, the seventeenth-century Italian "lesbian nun." In the course of an investigation into Carlini's mystical claims of being the bride of Christ, Bartolomea Crivelli, a younger and less powerful sister in the convent where Carlini was abbess, testified that Carlini had forced her into "the most immodest acts." "Benedetta would grab her by the arm and throw her by force on the bed. Embracing her, she would put her under herself and kissing her as if she were a man, she would speak words of love to her. And she would stir on top of her so much that both of them corrupted themselves."³⁹

There is also the tale of the early-nineteenth-century Scottish school-teachers made famous by Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. As reconstructed by Lillian Faderman in *Scotch Verdict*, Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie were accused by a student of coming to each other's beds, lying on top of one another, kissing, and shaking the bed. The student, Jane Cumming, born of a liaison between an Indian woman and an aristocratic Scottish man serving the empire in the East, reported that Jane said one night, "You are in the wrong place," and Marianne replied, "I know," and asserted that she was doing it "for fun." Another night, she said, Jane whispered, "Oh, do it, darling." And then Jane Cumming described, through her tears, the noise that she heard as similar to "putting one's finger into the neck of a wet bottle."⁴⁰

Perhaps the most extensive account we have of such sexual acts comes from the diary of Anne Lister, a nineteenth-century, upper-class, independent, mannish English woman. Anne recorded numerous sexual affairs with women, some of them married. In 1819, she detailed an encounter with the love of her life, Marianne, who married for economic and social status but continued her affair with Lister, passing on a venereal disease contracted from her husband through his own extramarital exploits. *Kiss* in Lister's

³⁸Quoted in Karen V. Hansen, "'No Kisses Is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-nineteenth Century," *Gender and History* 7: 153–82 (1995). See also Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854–1868* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

³⁹Quoted in Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 117–18.

⁴⁰Quoted in Lillian Faderman, *Scotch Verdict* (New York: Quill, 1983), 147.

diary is a code word for “orgasm.” “From the kiss she gave me it seemed as if she loved me as fondly as ever. By & by, we seemed to drop asleep but, by & by, I perceived she would like another kiss & she whispered, ‘Come again a bit, Freddy.’ But soon, I got up a second time, again took off, went to her a second time &, in spite of all, she really gave me pleasure, & I told her no one had ever given me kisses like hers.” Fed up with waiting for Marianne’s all-too-healthy husband to die, Lister went to Paris in 1824, where she began to court a widow staying in the same pension. One night the widow came to her room and climbed into bed with her: “I was contented that my naked left thigh should rest upon her naked left thigh and thus she let me grubble her over her petticoats. All the while I was pressing her between my thighs. Now and then I held my hand still and felt her pulsation, let her rise towards my hand two or three times and gradually open her thighs, and felt that she was excited.”⁴¹

Which of these descriptions qualify as “sex”? What is required? This question has been, historically, particularly difficult in the case of women, but even for men we are sometimes in the dark. At the same time that romantic friendship flourished among women, men in the United States might also kiss, hug, and share a bed with no sense that they were violating sexual norms. Jonathan Katz, in his forthcoming book, argues that the separation between love and lust—the notion not only that love between men had no connotations of sexuality, but also that sodomy was perceived as only sexual, with no connection to love—confused men who might have felt both.⁴² Although men might write, as did college students Albert Dodd and Anthony Halsey in the 1830s, of “how sweet” it was “to sleep with him, to hold his beloved form in my embrace, to have his arms about my neck, to imprint upon his face sweet kisses,” they had no words to describe what they felt.⁴³ By the end of the nineteenth century, New Yorker Frederick S. Ryman expressed unease about the possible sexual meanings of his fondness for “the Oriental custom of men embracing & kissing each other.” He described sleeping with his friend Rob’s arms around him but insisted, perhaps too vigorously, that “I am certain there

⁴¹Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister (1791–1840)*, ed. Helena Whitbread (New York: Virago, 1988), 104; Anne Lister, *No Priest but Love: The Journals of Anne Lister from 1824–1826*, ed. Helena Whitbread (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 65. On Lister, see Jill Liddington, “Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, Halifax (1791–1840): Her Diaries and the Historians,” *History Workshop* 35: 45–77 (1993); and Anna Clark, “Anne Lister’s Construction of Lesbian Identity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7: 23–50 (1996).

⁴²Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

⁴³E. Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800–1900,” *Journal of Social History* 23: 1–25 (1989), quotation on 7.

was no sexual sentiment on the part of either of us. We both have our mistresses . . . & I am certain that the thought of the least demonstration of unmanly & abnormal passion would have been as revolting to him as it is & ever has been to me.”⁴⁴

The association of romantic friendship in both its female and male forms with acts that are particularly hard to classify as either sex or not-sex suggests that there may be patterns in the kinds of acts that take place between individuals of the same sex in different varieties of relationships. Certainly it is clear that the particular part a man plays in a sexual act has always—or almost always?—been associated with gender and/or age or class, or, at least in some places, race or ethnicity. (Even here, though, I insert the “almost always” because evidence suggests that the “norm” of even societally deviant sex acts is not a firm description of reality. Both Don Kulick’s work on the *travestis* of Brazil and Annick Prieur’s study of the *jotas* of Mexico City point out that the “real men” who have sex with men dressed as women eventually, or sometimes, or often, want to reverse roles, even if they will never admit it. The drag queens that Verta Taylor and I are studying insist that, in private, what “straight” or bisexual men want is not what they say they want.)⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the act of putting one’s penis in the mouth, vagina, or anus of another is privileged, but the act of enclosing a penis with one’s mouth, vagina, or anus is not.

Putting aside such complications, are there other patterns? Does the intercrural sex—rubbing the penis between the thighs of another man—practiced between older and younger men in ancient Athens and in South African mine marriages (and among adolescents in the societies from which the miners came) have more loving and nurturing connotations than other acts? Is it true that anal sex has connotations of dominance, as Eva Keuls insists? Did romantic friends only caress each others’ breasts and engage in tribadism, and only women dressed as men penetrate their partners?

What about the fact that oral contact seems relatively infrequent on the global stage? Kissing, as we know, is not a universal erotic act, although it has a very long history in the Western world. In ancient Rome and in eighteenth-century Europe, fellatio was considered especially depraved. A Parisian hustler in 1783, according to a police agent who entrapped him, “says that he did it in all ways, *even that* if I wanted, I could consummate the act in his mouth.” Another man offered as proof of his strong love for another man that he had “many times . . . kissed his genitals and even his anus.”⁴⁶ Sex

⁴⁴Quoted in Martin Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1991), 63.

⁴⁵Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, “What Makes a Man a Man: Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming). Murray makes the same point in *Homosexualities*, referring to “boy tops” in a number of different cultural settings.

⁴⁶Quoted in Rey, “Parisian Homosexuals,” 184.

between men was so closely associated with anal intercourse that in 1914, when the police in Long Beach, California, arrested a group of men for deviant sexual behavior, they hardly knew what to make of what a reporter called “nothing more nor less than ‘cocksucking.’” This was not, however, the same as “homosexuality,” although it resembled it because “men find their sexual pleasure and gratification with men and boys rather than women and women on the other hand are attracted sexually toward girls and women instead of the opposite sex.”⁴⁷ The men who engaged in this practice called it “the twentieth-century way.” Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis document the dawning acceptability of oral sex among Buffalo bar lesbians in the 1950s, suggesting that this might have been the “mid-twentieth-century way” for U.S. women.⁴⁸ Surely oral sex is not new—we can find references to “paired eating” between women in the Han dynasty in China—but perhaps it experienced a revival in modern times.⁴⁹ Is there then something “modern” about fellatio and cunnilingus?

Although I am bold enough to dare to address a global history of same-sex sexuality, I am not foolish enough to pretend to have answers to all of these questions. As the Euramerican nature of most of the evidence I use to consider the nature of sexual acts makes plain, we (or, certainly, I) do not know enough about such questions in other parts of the world to say anything even suggestive. But I do think these are good questions for future research.

I have spent all this time undermining the term “same-sex sexuality,” but, in fact, I think that it is the best one we have. I have focused on the problems that arise from the term not because I think it is flawed, but because it in fact allows us to raise these very important questions about global patterns of love and desire between genitally alike bodies. I think we can see a limited number of patterns of same-sex interactions: differentiated by age or gender or class, or not differentiated in any of these ways; with spiritual or practical implications or based on desire and/or love; totally determining or determined by social roles, or not; clearly associated with specific acts, or not.⁵⁰ As we pursue our specific research projects,

⁴⁷Sharon R. Ullman, “‘The Twentieth Century Way’: Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (4): 573–600 (1995), quotation on 595.

⁴⁸Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*.

⁴⁹Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁵⁰In his comments at the Oslo conference, John Howard suggested that if we combine the myriad hierarchies of sexuality with the categories of age, gender, class, race, ethnicity, and so on, “we see a system of distinction-making that is virtually limitless in its permutations, in its capacity for normalizing and marginalizing.” I think this is an important point, but I am still struck, as is Stephen Murray, by the fact that there “are not hundreds or even dozens of different social organizations of homosexual relations in human societies.” See

we would do well to remember that we need to consider carefully the ways that love, desire, and relationships are structured by differences or similarities, and the meaning of sex acts in their historical contexts. There are rich stories of same-sex sexuality out there that will tell us a great deal about gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, bodies, emotions, social relations, religion, law, identity, community, activism, culture, and just about every other thing that is part of what we think of as history.

his "Homosexual Categorization in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Latin American Male Homosexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 3–32, quotation on 4, and the introduction to *Homosexualities*.