Introduction

Extraordinary Allegations: Scandalous Lesbian Suggestion and the Culture of Modernism

The following chapters host a vivid cast of characters who seem to share little but a proximity in time: a xenophobic, radical right-wing Independent Member of Parliament obsessed with spy conspiracies during the Great War; an avid psychical researcher harboring a personal vendetta against a member of his occult society in 1920; the Bishop of London, passionately appealing to the House of Lords to pass legislation in 1921 that would protect young women from the evils of prostitution; a brash New York lawyer whose money financed leading male modernists, including Ezra Pound and James Joyce; and the self-protecting class "fraction" of the Bloomsbury group.[1] The unlikely term that holds such disparate characters together is "lesbianism," specifically the scandal of lesbianism as it was manifest in legal trials and debates in the early twentieth century. Or, more accurately, lesbianism not as a stable identity category but as an accusation or suggestion – an "extraordinary allegation" – that had a remarkably active legal life during and shortly after the Great War. Indeed, this introduction takes its title from the headlines of an outrageous libel trial at the end of the Great War in which the tantalizing suggestion of lesbianism became the unlikely means of figuring a range of fears and fantasies about the war.[2] In *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism*, I argue that this lesbian scandal was not simply a wartime anomaly, but was one of a number of telling legal invocations, debates, and debacles about the suggestion of lesbianism at the time. Each chapter focuses on a trial between 1918 and 1928 that hinged on an accusation of lesbianism, encompassing trials for libel, slander, and obscenity. Within this context I also consider the 1921 British parliamentary debates over the criminalization of "acts of gross indecency" between women. Some of these legal events stole the headlines; others were a brief media curiosity.

All of them related to literary texts and figures – writers, editors, patrons, actresses – who contributed to the making of modernism, and all of them precipitated crises of reading and representation. Throughout my consideration of these trials and debates, I ask the simple and repeated questions of how and why the extraordinary allegation of lesbianism at the beginning of the twentieth century functioned to condense modern social anxieties, figure concerns about modernism, and mediate modernist literary communities while continuously resisting determinate interpretation. How, in turn, does the suggestion of lesbianism relate to the formation of literary modernism, particularly its uneasy relation to accusations of obscenity? These questions lead to larger ones about how and why scandalous sexual suggestions matter to the making of nation, art, and culture: In being cognitively impossible and unrepresentable, what has the suggestion of lesbianism *made possible*?

FROM INVISIBLE WOMEN TO SCANDALOUS SUGGESTION

> In the eyes of the law I am non existent.
>
> – Radclyffe Hall to Havelock Ellis, 2 December 1928[3]

> Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable. How, then, to "be" a lesbian in a political context in which the lesbian does not exist?
>
> – Judith Butler[4]

"Lesbian" historians, philosophers, and literary critics tend to agree: Lesbianism in the modern West has been largely invisible, cognitively unthinkable, and culturally and epistemologically "non existent." In *Coming Out* (1977), one of the first books to document a lesbian and gay history in Britain, Jeffrey Weeks entitles the section on pre-Stonewall lesbians "Invisible Women." Noting that early-twentieth-century sexologists had trouble even finding lesbians for their case studies, Weeks concludes, "If male homosexuals are the 'twilight men' of twentieth-century history, lesbians are by and large the 'invisible women.'"[5] The dilemma is as much cognitive as it is empirical; critical theories as diverse as Luce Irigaray's 1970s French-feminist psychoanalysis, Marilyn Frye's 1980s lesbian-feminist philosophy, and Judith Butler's 1990s identity-questioning poststructuralism similarly characterize contemporary lesbianism as "incomprehensible" to dominant systems of gender and desire, "excluded from the [Western conceptual] scheme," and unaccommodated by "that

grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable."[6] In an influential formulation, literary critic Terry Castle invokes the trope of the phantom or apparition to convey the lesbian's ontological dilemma throughout history. "Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us?" Castle asks, and answers, "In part because she has been 'ghosted' – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself."[7]

Although female same-sex desire may have largely eluded signification in the past, there have been, of course, women attracted to, devoted to, desiring of, and in love with other women, and for decades, feminist scholarship has combated the historical and cultural "invisibility" of lesbianism to rematerialize that which has been "made to seem invisible," including lesbianism as an identity category. Recently, theorists have also revisited lesbian invisibility and cultural unintelligibility to reframe such terms of negation as, in fact, productive figures that signal lesbianism's uniquely fraught and elusive relationship to representation and history. This work has also shifted the focus from the literal and ontological to the figural and representational, from looking for the lesbian subject who has been "made to seem invisible" to considering how invisibility and impossibility are the very terms by and through which lesbianism is figured and comes into being.[8]

This approach to the productivity of lesbianism's representational impossibility tends to theorize lesbianism in relation to psychoanalytic concepts of the symbolic. Indeed, in a heterosexual phallocentric matrix, it is not hard to imagine how and why a sexuality that is exclusive to women would simply drop out of – or exist as a gap or foreclosure in – the cultural symbolic. The recognition of lesbianism has no place in representational systems that have historically and structurally secured the power and privilege of masculinity through an exchange of women between men. Subsequently, it is not surprising that there has not been an explicit legal prohibition against lesbianism, but rather a more elusive systemic proscription of female desire and gender performance that has excluded – or foreclosed – lesbianism as a category of desire or identity. At the same time, these terms of lesbian figuration have the potential to subvert the very structures of representation. Along these lines, Lynda Hart, Judith Roof, Valerie Rohy, and Annamarie Jagose have all implied or directly claimed that lesbianism's fraught relation to symbolization aligns with Slovoj Žižek's interpretation of the Lacanian Real.[9] Rohy is most careful in proposing "the discursive construction of lesbianism *as figure for* the [Lacanian] real," which, she cautions, "is, crucially, not to claim that

lesbianism *is* the real," but nonetheless has "powerful consequences" in its potential to expose and disrupt systems of meaning.[10] Accordingly, it is not that the lesbian subject has been erased by systems of representation, but rather that as a "logical impossibility," lesbianism potentially destabilizes a heteronormative symbolic order that depends on the phallus as visible figure and signifier. Ultimately, lesbian invisibility functions as both the very condition of lesbianism's representation, and its means of exposing the lack in systems of representation.

My own arguments about the work of lesbian suggestion do not depend on a psychoanalytic framework of interpretation; however, they do accord with Rohy, Hart, Jagose, and Roof's consideration of lesbianism as both a productive and destabilizing figure within systems of meaning and representation. Indeed, each chapter of *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* explores the crises of representation and interpretation that are brought about by lesbian suggestion, and what in turn these representational crises make culturally possible. At the historical moment when modern discourses of lesbianism were emerging in Britain and the United States, but had not yet been consolidated through a legal spectacle like that of Oscar Wilde's, we find that the scandalous *suggestion* or *allegation* of lesbianism actually accomplished a great deal of powerful but unpredictable cultural work for the very reason that the supposed content behind the suggestion was both inconceivable and somehow always already known as a foreclosed (im)possibility. Poised in this contradictory epistemological position, the suggestion of lesbianism functioned as a figure for unrepresentable cultural and artistic anxieties in early-twentieth-century Anglo-American modernity and modernism. Consequently, in historically elaborating what I call the suggestion of lesbianism, I regard the "invisibility" and "non existence" of lesbianism not as the effects of repression, but as the very terms by and through which lesbianism comes into being in the period. Concerned with how lesbian suggestion lends itself to historically specific concerns, this work is more interested in the shifting operational function of such "extraordinary allegations" than in the degree to which they establish a stable identity category. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely in *not being there* that (the suggestion of) lesbianism can do so much in specific historical contexts, particularly in the making of modernism. Moving away from the question of the ontological (who was the lesbian?) to the operational (how did the suggestion of lesbianism culturally function?) moves us beyond discussions of lesbianism as a marginalized (or even "foreclosed") identity and toward an awareness of how scandalous sexual suggestions matter and mean in broader and often

unlikely cultural situations. To move in that direction, however, I still must address two identity-related considerations: first, where my work fits within questions of sexual identity and history, and second, how and why I use the term "lesbianism" in the book's controlling concept of the suggestion of lesbianism.

ONCE A TRIBADE, ALWAYS A DYKE?: NOTES ON LESBIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

As I write this introduction, queer and lesbian historiography continues to develop new questions and approaches to thinking about sexuality in history, while producing an ever-more multiform historical account of female same-sex desire, practices, and identity categories stretching back several centuries. Indeed, historians of the early modern period have significantly advanced theorizations of lesbian historiography, particularly as they have contended with Foucault's influential claim that homosexuality as an identity came into being only in the late nineteenth century. In this regard, Valerie Traub's work proves particularly helpful for thinking historically about desire between women and the "category of self" attributed to those desires.[11] As a Renaissance scholar mindful of historiographic debates that pit claims of historical continuity and consistency of sexual types against claims of historical specificity and discontinuity of sexualities, Traub considers the potential relationship between past representations and present identities, without endorsing a "teleology."[12] Resisting the "tired binaries" of acts/identities and continuism/alterity, she is interested in "accounting for the apparent resemblances linking various manifestations of *lesbianism* across time. Such resemblances shimmer unsteadily and unevenly, moving closer or receding, depending on what one is looking for."[13] This dilemma leads to an insightful and influential proposal:

> Why do certain figures of eroticism (and gender) become culturally salient at certain moments?… it would seem that certain axes of social definition, and the ideological faultlines they subtend, have been endemic features of erotic discourse since at least the early seventeenth century. Emerging at certain moments, silently disappearing from view, and then reemerging in another guise as particularly relevant (or explosively volatile), these recurrent explanatory logics seem to underlie the organization, and reorganization, of erotic life. Nonetheless, the forms these axes take, their specific manifest content, the discourses in which they are embedded, and the angle of relations between them all are subject to change. Social preoccupations come into and out of focus, political exigencies are reconfigured, discourses converge and the points of contact between them shift – and in the process, discourses themselves are altered.

Like the periodic moral panics first adduced by Gayle Rubin and Jeffrey Weeks, such cycles of salience may be linked temporally and conceptually to moments of social crisis which have their source in anxieties peripheral to eroticism (such as fears about changing gender roles, nationalist or racist fears of contamination, and broad concerns about morality or social discipline).[14]

Recognizing "those perennial axes of social definition that accord to the history of *lesbianism* a certain consistency and eerie familiarity," Traub hopes lesbian historiography might "fashion a synoptic account of multiple linkages, forged from a variety of angles, between historical regimes – without losing sight of each regime's specificity, complexity, relative coherence, and incoherence."[15]

With this in mind, my study attends to the particularly salient early-twentieth-century moment in which the suggestion of lesbianism operated, while considering how these suggestions relate to historically recurrent "explanatory logics" of female sexuality. The early twentieth century has been considered a period when a more cohesive notion of modern lesbian identity was under elaboration and in emergence in the West, precipitated by sexology, female emancipation and the women's movement, the impact of the Great War, and developing sexual subcultures. My work builds on this field, particularly as it has been developed by Laura Doan, Gay Wachman, and Deborah Cohler,[16] to consider how a wide range of different ideas and figures of female same-sex desire inform and are informed by specific legal debates, national issues, and artistic concerns in the decade leading up to the 1928 trial of *The Well of Loneliness* – an event, arguably, that scandalously enshrined a distinct image of lesbianism in British public discourse. I demonstrate how lesbian suggestion manifests as "culturally salient" both in relation to the period's social preoccupations and political exigencies, including the war, changing family and gender roles, and changes in media, as well as to distinct concerns in modernist literary production, including obscenity and censorship, patronage relations, modes of publication and circulation, and how intimate artistic social networks negotiated their public reputations. Further, insofar as the broader "perennial axes of social definition" of lesbianism are often oppositional (butch/femme; unsexed/oversexed), we find that different ones are invoked and deployed according to the personal and cultural necessities of the moment, making for remarkable inconsistency even within a specific historical moment.

My discussion of the invocation, debates, and deployments of lesbian suggestion shifts the focus from identity questions about who lesbians "were," how they felt about themselves, or how they formed communities

and subcultures to rhetorical and operational questions of how and why extraordinary allegations of lesbianism functioned: What did the suggestion of lesbianism *do* in representing the unrepresentable anxieties and issues of the period? And, once we see what it does, how does that change not only how we understand the history of representations of female sexuality, but also how we see the instability of sexual and gender representation itself as critical to the making and unmaking of national culture, legal institutions, and artistic communities?

In this regard, this book takes up Susan Lanser's recent proposal to "flip the scholarly coin from the *history of sexuality* to the *sexuality of history*: from the premise that sexuality is historically constructed to the claim that history is also sexually constructed and that the large movements of societies and cultures can be read as and through sexuality."[17] Indeed, Lanser's own historical work argues that what she calls "sapphic subjects" functioned as the "very *signifier* of modernity," where modernity applies to the "fundamental shifts in social structures and beliefs" experienced in Western Europe in the centuries' long movement from the premodern to the modern.[18] My focus is more historically and geographically localized than Lanser's, but similarly aspires to address the *sexuality of history* by proposing that the suggestion of lesbianism was a signifying and mediating figure – in the most unlikely and unintended ways – for the culture of modernism.

I use the term "culture of modernism" in the broadest and most flexible sense, but there are a few connotations that are important to highlight. Trained as a literary critic, my sense of modernism references that varied set of artistic and literary practices, production, and milieus from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century that have retrospectively been designated "modernist," not least because they were responding, in a variety of ways, to "problems posed by the conditions of modernity" or "an epoch of accelerating social *modernization*," to quote two recent guides to modernism.[19] Modernity is of course an impossibly far-reaching and contested term, but when uttered in the same breath as modernism, it references the general sense of rapid changes experienced at the turn of the century, to which modernism was both responding and contributing. Indeed, another recent literary guide claims the term modernism "primarily suggests … a sense of crisis and a will to innovation. In most cases this involves a break with traditional modes and subject matter."[20] Crisis, innovation, different or changing modes and subject matter – these constitute not only how we now talk about literary modernism, but also the culture in which it operated – the culture of modernism. Insofar

as modernism was responding to, figuring, furthering, or signifying this sense of cultural change and crisis, it was often regarded by contemporary observers (outside of modernism's champions) with a degree of curiosity, skepticism, or distrust precisely because its new and different modes of expression and subject matter challenged (often intentionally) conventions of reading and interpretation. This not-always-welcome challenge of literary modernism need not be temporally new. For example, in the first trial discussed in this book, when Oscar Wilde significantly ghosts a lesbian libel trial in the last year of the Great War, his artistic theories and practices, linked to his transgressive sexuality, are figured as more unconventional and culturally threatening during the war than during his lifetime. Indeed, wartime and postwar culture was, as we know, a complex contradiction of radical cultural changes experienced alongside a desire to find or reestablish cultural stability, including reverting back to reliable and familiar conventions of understanding, beliefs, and modes of interpretation. Particularly in the first two chapters, which focus on lesbian suggestions in wartime and postwar discourse, the culture of modernism applies to this general sense of British cultural disruption in the period, as well as the ways in which artistic modernism was regarded as both symptom and signifier of that change. In these cases, the suggestion of lesbianism condenses general cultural anxieties that may be distinctly "modern," and it does so is through an association with particular literary milieus or elite social groups that we now read as modernist.

Although the third and fourth chapters also engage with this ambient sense of change and difference associated with the culture of modernism, they more directly address the material culture of modernist production – the making of modernist texts and reputations, and the social and economic networks on which such production relied, including the specific communities of writers, editors, publishers, and financial supporters who self-consciously produced modernism as an artistic and cultural enterprise. Here, then, the culture of modernism also references in a very ordinary sense the ethos, social relations, attitudes, and modes of address – the "structure of feeling," to use Raymond Williams's phrase – that shaped such modernist communities. These chapters consider how the suggestion of lesbianism mattered to two very different but equally iconic modernist communities: the "men of 1914" and the Bloomsbury group. Over the course of the book, then, I argue that suggestions of lesbianism – often working through a vague association with unconventional artistic practices or high society milieus – came to figure social concerns and anxieties within Britain's disrupted national culture, while

also figuring and mediating concerns of artistic production and reputation within discrete modernist communities. But why the suggestion of *lesbianism*? Although this book considers how lesbianism functions as an unidentified suggestion that avoids specific naming, what about my own choice in naming lesbianism as such?

LESBIAN NAME-CALLING: A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Aware of the perils of doing so, I have chosen to use "lesbianism" as a broad reference for the range of possible female same-sex practices, behaviors, affiliations, and identity categories that are suggested in the cases I examine. This assumes neither a clear category of lesbian identity over time, nor one within the period under discussion. Indeed, my qualification (or equivocation) – the *suggestion of* lesbianism – is intended to keep the term unstable while emphasizing questions of representation and interpretation, rather than specific identities. In this way, I adopt Traub's conditions for her use of "lesbian" as referring to "a representational image, a rhetorical figure, a discursive effect, rather than a stable epistemological or historical category. It is employed as an exceptionally compressed and admittedly inadequate rubric for a wide, and sometimes conflicting, range of affective and erotic desires, practices, and affiliations, which have taken different historical forms and accrued varied historical meanings."[21] Indeed, it is not in my project's interest to try to limit or specify what sexual references may be behind the extraordinary allegations I consider, for these lesbian suggestions in fact rarely cite either a distinct identity or same-sex act; rather, they refer to forms of female deviance or deviant femininity. In this regard, I also find helpful Valerie Rohy's explanation of her use of "lesbianism"

> not as an essential identity, morphology, or even, necessarily, object choice, but as a name for the set of sexual and discursive effects that patriarchal culture displaces onto figures of perverse female desire. In patriarchal culture, that is, lesbianism can name any female sexuality that by refusing heterosexual object-choice, by failing to contribute to the work of reproduction, by alluding to a preoedipal bond with the mother, or by presenting a nongenital organization of desire, seems imbued with pathology or morbidity.[22]

In my own findings, the suggestion of lesbianism is projected onto a variety of actions that need not even qualify as "perverse female *desire*" – but simply perverse or deviant female *behaviors* that have little to do with sexuality, from women communicating with a spiritual medium to women editing a modernist magazine. At a time when women's interests and

behaviors continually veer away from conventional femininity, the extraordinary allegations that suggest lesbianism in this period are rarely really about a woman's same-sex erotic behavior – they are allegations deployed for other reasons and reference a woman's social standing, her public eroticism and performance, or her power as a cultural producer – all issues, I will argue, relevant to the culture and production of modernism.

Indeed, a central claim of the book is that suggestions of lesbianism are often aleatory invocations – the lesbian accusation is invoked almost by chance, not for its particular content, but instead for its potential scandalous effects. In this way, it is a perlocutionary performative speech act, as defined by J. L. Austin and taken up by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech*. Whereas illocutionary speech acts produce effects at the moment of utterance and are supported "by linguistic and social conventions," such as "I sentence you," perlocutionary acts "are those utterances that initiate a set of consequences" that are temporally distinct from the utterance: "these consequences are not the same as the act of speech, but are rather 'what we bring about or achieve by saying something'"; Butler also points out that "Austin remarks … that some consequences of a perlocution may be unintentional." [23] In the extraordinary allegations I explore, particularly the libel and slander cases, the lesbian suggestion is precisely this kind of promiscuous perlocution. It is invoked by the speaker not out of a concern for lesbianism per se (or any specific sexual identity), but for the potential of such a suggestion to precipitate particular scandalous effects and consequences; however, these consequences prove beyond the speaker's intent and control. In this way the suggestion of lesbianism emerges and functions discursively as an aleatory, variable, and ultimately unpredictable provocation.

In examining how the incoherence of lesbian suggestion functions in particular legal cases, I am not trying to chart what lesbian identity was, or the origins of its current categorization. At the same time, as the many and varied forms of female same-sex desires, practices, and identity categories are disinterred and debated, they are discovered to be burrowing deeper into history than previously assumed, and this work reveals that the terms "Lesbia" and "Lesbian" were in circulation centuries before the cases I discuss.[24] Indeed, perhaps the term "lesbian" has appeared and disappeared according to certain historical "cycles of salience." In any case, I consider it a usefully unstable term for the early twentieth century, as a period characterized by representational instability and morphological uncertainty about women's same-sex desires and identities. It is a moment when lesbianism is about to (re)emerge as a more coherent category, and