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978-1-107-03521-8 - The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature

Edited by E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen

Excerpt

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Introduction

E. L. MCCALLUM AND MIKKO TUHKANEN

Is there such a thing as “gay and lesbian literature?” It might seem odd to pose this question at the outset of a collection of essays appearing under this very heading, much less one whose title implicitly asserts that not only does such literature exist but that it has a history. Our view is that all the terms of the title bear equal degrees of skepticism, yet insofar as there is a thing called “literature,” or a formation of “history” that charts the evolution of this entity, there could be something that might be called “gay and lesbian” literature. As Barbara Johnson has observed, “it is not simply a question of literature’s ability to say or not say the truth of sexuality. For from the moment literature begins to try to set things straight on that score, literature itself becomes inextricable from the sexuality that it seeks to comprehend” (13). As astute a close reader as Johnson would not miss the queer resonances of “to set things straight”; we begin with Johnson’s insight in order to signal this volume’s intention to undo how literary studies has been set (as) straight.

To peruse the ranks of Cambridge’s History of Literature series is to be faced with collections largely organized by nation, period, or genre. By contrast, this volume works across those three major vectors for organizing literary studies. Notwithstanding Queer Nation’s campy activist formation in the 1990s, and in line with Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman’s trenchant assessment of the nation paradigm for queer sociopolitical organizing, LGBTQI people hardly constitute a nation. Indeed, as not a few of our contributors point out, the state may attempt to expunge all evidence of same-sex desire, whether in literary or actual practice, in the very name of “nation.” Nor does “gay and lesbian” necessarily indicate a period, even though the history of sexuality marks the inception of the term “homosexual” as a particular Western ontological category in the sexual taxonomy of the late nineteenth century. If “gay and lesbian literature” depends on a notion of the homosexual, such literature would be periodized as a peculiarly modern and Western phenomenon. Nor, finally, is “gay and lesbian literature” a genre. Ever since the Sumerian story

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of *Gilgamesh*, one of the first epics, the expression of same-sex desire has been narrativized, lyricized, dramatized, and chronicled – at times, moreover, bending gender to the point where the sameness of “sex” is itself in question, even if the genre is not. Moreover, within a geographically or historically bounded literary field, “genre” is a multiply significant term that can code class and educational differences as differences of taste. The representation of same-sex desire, however, crosses all literary tastes, from readily accessible pulp fiction to more difficult experimental modernist genre-bending texts and rigorously formal Shakespearean sonnets.

Any attempt to historicize lesbian and gay literature immediately confronts, then, several interlocking difficulties: namely, how do we identify, much less understand, identity categories like “gay” or “lesbian,” which are founded on locally contingent sexual practices, networks, and desires? As scholars of sexuality’s histories have recurrently told us, we must be wary of simplifying, miscategorizing, and thereby misreading literary and sexual expressions that vary widely across cultures and historical periods. Post-Stonewall anthologies of “gay” or “gay and lesbian” literature have been faulted for uncritically uniting under the banner “gay” such incommensurable figures as the pederast of ancient Greece, the Two-Spirit individual of many indigenous cultures of North America, and the medieval sodomite, among others. The question of whether there can be said to be a “homosexuality” before persons in first-world modern societies began identifying themselves through this term, promoted in nineteenth-century sexology, has been expatiated by cultural and literary scholars for more than twenty years, and our contributors continue this inquiry. As critics who research sexual expression in texts from premodern periods or from non-Western cultures refine and complicate their analyses, they map the continuities and discontinuities of how people in times and places other than the modern West inscribe their sexual identities, practices, and desires through literature. Such research enables us to say, albeit with some degree of caution, that there is a literary history of and for sexually marginalized people, and that this literary history must be understood as situated in cultures across the globe and from ancient times to modern.

In a similar way – especially for this set of texts, once they have been identified – the term “literature” itself cannot be taken for granted because the writing of same-sex desire traverses canonical as well as noncanonical or even uncanonizable works – which is to say, writing that exceeds literary boundaries or invents new genres (as Montaigne’s essays do, defining *l’amitié* as what can only be explained by “parce que c’était lui, parce que c’était moi”; “because it was he, because it was I”). The literature of same-sex desire includes texts

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ranging from philosophical dialogues of antiquity, to early modern sonnets, to award-winning twentieth-century novels, to science fictions of future worlds. The recent long century of “homosexuality” has witnessed the emergence of a literary canon that draws its inspiration from expressions and representations of same-sex desires in prior centuries. This canon – or, to put it more accurately, these canons – have greatly influenced how individuals have identified themselves as lesbian or gay. As David Bergman noted some twenty years ago, so many questioning youth come first to acknowledge their desires through their relation to texts rather than people (5–6). Yet the solitary pursuits of the library are indissociable from the pursuit of like-minded others; thus, beyond supporting individuals’ identities, gay or lesbian literary canons have served to elaborate a common culture for their respective communities and subcultures. And while these canons have – like any other in the past half century – not stood unchanged or unchallenged, in the several iterations of lists of books every young queer should read persist some literary classics of same-sex desire (Sappho’s fragments; Plato’s *Symposium*; a number of Shakespeare’s sonnets; Whitman’s “Calamus” series; Oscar Wilde’s oeuvre; Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*; James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*; Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*).

Each chapter in this volume implicitly charts the formation, and many seek the de-formation, of such canons. The chapters constitute responses to ongoing debates about gay historiography – how same-sex sexual desires and practices have been culturally and historically configured in a wide range of modes – as well as to the debates about the nature of literature and of literary canons per se, the politics around inclusion and exclusion, or the sensitivity to questions of aesthetics and literary merit versus representational or cultural significance. Our principle for defining the horizon and organization of this volume draws on Wai Chee Dimock’s idea of planetary literatures, fields of texts that constitutively cross temporal and geographic boundaries. As Dimock puts it in *Through Other Continents* (2006), this paradigm models how to relinquish the idea of national literature as a bounded entity and replace it with one that consists of “a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures” (3). We had asked contributors to bear in mind such traversals of language, culture, and geography as they formulated their chapters because we think that this approach offers a promising way to open up connections even beyond the necessary limits of this volume.

While we aim to keep an eye on the larger literary-historical trends, at the same time we recognize that readers of *The Cambridge History of Gay and*

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Lesbian Literature are likely to turn to this volume in search of a particular author – say, Sappho, Lord Byron, Walt Whitman, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, Gloria Anzaldúa – or certain key works. So in addition to the encyclopedic scope of some chapters, we sought to include a few essays that focus narrowly on specific works or authors, providing a keyhole that will open up the discussion to a larger tradition/history in a national, transnational, subcultural, or transcultural context. By including such perspectives, we balance the “planetary” with a much more local approach, helping readers scale their understandings of lesbian and gay literary history at multiple levels: the level of the unique text; of the author’s oeuvre; or, in the absence of an author-figure, a constellation of texts that speak to one another in a particular cultural moment (be it lesbian pulp novels or the Elizabethan stage), the region, school, or movement in which certain works are situated (for example, romanticism, modernism, or feminism), or the planetary traversals that lesbian or gay literature traces (say, the elegy, in ancient Greece or the age of AIDS).

As we planned this volume we questioned whether chapters should focus on the works of identifiably gay or lesbian authors (Christopher Marlowe, Audre Lorde, Constantine Cavafy) or on works featuring same-sex eroticism no matter what the orientation of the author. We suggested our contributors not choose between but rather embrace both. Moreover, setting aside the complications of historical apprehension and naming, questions of the “degree” of same-sex interest haunt critical reading and selection: how do we acknowledge and discuss a spectrum of sexuality? If explicitly represented erotic acts and professions of ardor count, how do they compare to the more ambiguous or indirectly represented ranges of sociability, friendship, or even unshared affect (desire, love, obsession, repressed attraction)? To what extent does representation of women’s desire – a challenge in patriarchal cultures in the best of times and a long-standing concern of feminist criticism – differ from that of men, which may be under other kinds of pressure – whether to explicitness in phallogophilic cultures, or indirection in homophobic ones. In some instances, we disintegrated lesbian and gay literary history in separate chapters or threads within chapters, for however interrelated the histories of male and female homosexuality are, there remain distinctions that must not be assimilated into one “homosexual” paradigm. In other instances, we encouraged contributors to work across the traditions of lesbian and gay writing, for the perspectives they share in being sexual minorities or for their common ground in other social and political commitments (to friendship, say, or social justice), or simply to highlight the incommensurability of the comparison.

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Although the title claims a focus on *Gay and Lesbian Literature*, a number of our contributors shied from using the eponymous terminology. While this is at minimum an issue of translation – as Patricia Sieber and Giovanni Vitiello show, for instance, in Chinese there are a range of terms that signify same-sex desiring individuals – terminology tends to be an intellectual question deeply imbricated in each chapter’s stakes. Even the question of translation is hardly simple. Thomas Bauer’s chapter on classical Arabic and Abdulhamit Arvas’s chapter on Ottoman literature converge on some similar terms that crossed between Arabic and Turkish languages and marked some shared cultural practices; but as Bauer and Arvas show, these seemingly similar terms take on very distinct cultural valences in their respective contexts. At times, of course, it just makes scholarly sense to avoid “gay” or “lesbian” to discuss the depictions of sexuality, as Karma Lochrie’s medieval chapter demonstrates: to use these terms is to impose a modern view of sexuality on a much different cultural world, even if it is the one historically anchoring the Anglophone culture of today. Similarly, Lisa Tatonetti’s chapter on Native American literature charts a political nomenclature that signals the recovery of a larger marginalized history of indigenous North Americans.

But even the chapters focusing on the modern West will work among a range of terms, quite often favoring some version of the acronym LGBTQI (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer/questioning-intersex) or simply the term “queer,” which itself seeks to destabilize and call into question the very possibility of identity categories and concomitant politics (a liberal, entity-based rights system rather than, say, a progressive antidiscriminatory and possibility-generating system). We embrace the range of terms and acronyms offered by the chapters as a key rhetorical move for underscoring the politics of literary canonization and the urgency of literature as a dynamic, world-making force. This is part of our attempt to move away from what Robert Reid-Pharr, in his contribution, calls “the production of tinny, one-dimensional depictions of human possibility that disable us in our efforts to name the complexity of human existence.”

With our planetary approach, we thus do not presume a single canon or tradition. Rather, our aim is to provide a composite and dynamic view: how certain texts traverse the distance from one cultural or historical context to implant themselves into another, how certain other texts might remain dominant across centuries even as their significance is reconfigured or revalued by readers, and finally how some texts circulated forcefully in one place or era but have not (yet) been picked up by subsequent moments. Thus, while our trajectory ostensibly moves from ancient times to the present, it is important

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to recognize how within that order the chapters afford different, lateral, and retrospective movements. Epitomizing this queerly nonlinear history, for example, the very first chapter traces cross-temporal genealogies of Sappho as both a lesbian icon and a writer whose case illustrates the complexities of reading literature outside one's own historical, geographical, and linguistic moment. Because so much of the tradition in what might belatedly be called "gay and lesbian literature" draws on and refers back to antiquity, especially ancient Greece, we felt it important to anchor the volume in classical literature but simultaneously to mark how the return to antiquity varies in later centuries and in different cultural traditions. Other chapters in the section "Reading Ancient and Classical Cultures" trace the importance of such formations as the Platonic dialogues and the Greek pastoral for subsequent eras' expression of same-sex desire. Jay Reed's treatment of the pastoral will resonate with Thomas Hubbard's and Jonathan Goldberg's subsequent attention to this form. These ancient texts provide a paradigmatic case for the accessibility of meaning in writing that is remote from our moment in time, space, and cultural practice, and they illustrate how the movement of poems or dialogues through time and across cultures is affected not only by the material transformation of the text (fragmentation or loss of the physical record) but by the contextual transformation of meaning. Yet a similarly meticulous stance toward texts in a more recent field, like children's literature – which the volume's penultimate chapter explores – yields equally resonant questions about the shifting nature of representation, expression, and identity.

The chapter groupings suggest the importance of same-sex passions' expression to various historical moments, but the sectioning is not neat. The first section includes chapters on founding moments in other major literatures: those in English, Arabic, and Chinese. So while these are not strictly speaking "ancient" in historical terms, these literatures serve, as antiquity does for European culture in general, as the intellectual anchor of cultural identity. Moreover, Karma Lochrie's term "configurations" of sexuality and gender as a way to highlight the difficulty of interpreting same-sex intimacies in a remote period continues to reverberate in later sections and eras. While the chapters in the "Renaissance and Early Modern" section map the configurations of same-sex desire that might be said to be the genealogical forbearers of modern gays and lesbians, these authors also trouble any easy linearity that might be drawn from, say, the libertine to the invert to the homosexual. Both Goldberg and Arvas trace the shifting significance of the expression of same-sex love in canonical literatures, while Sherry Velasco, David Orvis, and Lisa O'Connell examine in the literary traces of what we might think of as

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queer figures today the complications of claiming early modern subversions of gender and sexuality as gay precursors.

As we move into the “Enlightenment Cultures” section, the authors’ attention turns to the affective bonds that undergird the nascent discourses and institutions of the Age of Reason – bonds of nation, friendship, and affection in which same-sex expression plays a significant role. Speaking of the French Revolution and the rise of the modern state, Enlightenment and Rousseau scholar Robert Wokler writes: “In addition to superimposing undivided rule upon its subjects, the genuinely modern state further requires that those who fall under its authority be united themselves – that they form one people, one nation, morally bound together by a common identity” (197). As Peter Coviello suggests, in the early days of the United States such unity coalesced from various forms of intimate affiliation, some of which appear to twentieth- and twenty-first century observers markedly queer. Many of the shifts in the ways that such intimacies signified as the nineteenth century progressed were responses to the discourses and institutions of human sciences, including sexuality and racial sciences; hence, Coviello enjoins us to recognize the history of nationhood – the production of its affective collectivity – as coincident with the history of sexuality. It is here that we can discern Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s continuing importance to LGBTQI scholarship. Sedgwick’s early work, particularly in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), famously rendered visible the purloined letter of male same-sex desire – the shifting line between the homosocial and the homosexual – in the most canonical of historical and literary texts. Drawing on the recent “affective turn” in literary scholarship, the chapters in this section seek to access the unspent energies of queer intimacies that the epistemological frames of traditional historiographies tend to render invisible. Where Robert Tobin, Christopher Castiglia, and Peter Coviello track the range and intensity of homo-desiring cadences that, given later twentieth-century shifts in identity formations, were to be silenced, Steven Bruhm and GerShun Avilez attend to literatures that have, albeit for different reasons, more directly problematized sexuality – namely, the Gothic and African American literature.

The section “Queer Modernisms” frames the emergence of a self-consciously defined homosexual culture and its self-consciously experimental literature, but even here, as Sara Danius reminds us in the case of Proust, the resistances to “homosexual” enrich the reading and the writing of these texts. Similarly, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley reads Caribbean women’s expressive histories in line with the affective problematic framed by the “Enlightenment Cultures” section, to seek the frequencies we need to tune into to discern

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the prolific traces of women-loving women in the archives of transatlantic Caribbean literature. In various ways, Elisa Glick, Merrill Cole, and Helena Gurfinkel's chapters work across national and linguistic boundaries to map the collusion of modern cultural forces in the emergence of queer figures and queer affective flows.

The last two sections focus largely on contemporary literature, understood as the long twentieth century into the present moment. Again, the division is schematic rather than strict. We brought together the chapters in the "Geographies of Same-Sex Desire in the Modern World" section to make manifest the planetary stakes of LGBTQI literature – that it is not some marginal, peculiarly Euro-American phenomenon. The chapters themselves trouble national definitions of literature, whether it be Philippe Dubois's reading of francophone texts from Paris to Quebec to Morocco or Lisa Tatonetti's and Neville Hoad and Chris Dunton's continental vantage that reads across the literatures of a number of nations. Finally, we conclude with a section that uses the commonality of language and period to focus attention on genre. Authors in "Genres of the Present" explore the various ways that modern homosexuality articulated itself in specific ways through poetry, drama, fiction, autobiography, sci-fi/fantasy literatures, pulp fiction and popular culture, children's literature, and the various responses elicited by the AIDS crisis.

As essential to the history of any literature as primary texts are, a thorough literary archive also concerns itself with secondary work – that which elucidates, critiques, interprets, or otherwise comments on the literature itself. Most of our contributors not only reflect the state of the field, glossing how previous scholarship has treated representations of same-sex desire, but, more important, work to engage and redefine the scholarship. That is, the critical task of each essay is twofold: to weigh the various scholarly approaches that have developed in lesbian and gay literary studies (with its necessary links to the fields of historical, sociological, or psychological research); and to contribute to the reconceptualization or elaboration of scholarship. Bearing in mind the "deep time" scale of our planetary approach, we have also encouraged contributors to sustain anachronistic and other critical tensions in order to open up not only the field of "gay and lesbian literature" but also link to other fields – national literatures, bodies of texts understood in terms of temporal, cultural, or geographical boundedness – and their ongoing reconceptualization.

The ethos of our project, then, strives toward opening up categories and establishing interconnections, in agreement with recent trends in literary studies that seek to rearticulate previously bounded entities (for example, "American literature" or "Medieval literature") with neglected genealogies

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that connect these entities to other traditions across temporal and geographic boundaries. The project conceives of literary history not as a master narrative but along Foucauldian lines as a genealogy, or, to push the planetary metaphor further, as a sampled geology. This collection makes no claim to bring a total view of the possibilities for lesbian and gay literary history; inevitably not all texts or subfields, even quite significant ones, can be included. We hope that the silences, absences, and gaps in the composite picture emerge as productively as do the interconnections among what *is* here.

Because of the unusual breadth of the project and the liveliness of current debates in literary studies about lesbian, gay, and queer historiography, as well as the extension and evolution of literature itself, we are mindful, then, of a certain impossibility that characterizes this project. The task of deciding what to include is necessarily arbitrary, whether at the chapter level or in the book as a whole. Many of our contributors acknowledge this bind by issuing what Darieck Scott, in his chapter, calls “the standard prophylactic”: that what follows does not seek coverage but aims at experimenting with useful narratives through which to think about the field’s past, present, and future. The range of possible accounts seems infinite, and we make no claims to offering a comprehensive view. If in our conceptualization of the project we are deemed guilty of courting what Hegel calls “bad infinity,” we may want to own our badness. For Hegel, true infinity tends toward the synthetic moment of the Absolute, the subsumption of disparate parts into sense-making unity; this has allowed not only him but also later critics, such as Francis Fukuyama, to claim “the end” as their historical moment, as embodied in a given collectivization (say, the nation), political structure (liberal democracy), or socio-economic system (neoliberal capitalism).

Rather than adopting this teleological movement as history’s truth, one might think about a different model of history with some help from Chinua Achebe. In *Things Fall Apart* (1959), Achebe narrates, in what many scholars have considered a tragic mode, the encounter between Igbo culture and European colonizers. He illustrates the various ways this encounter may have taken place by briefly contrasting the actions of Okonkwo, the novel’s non-adaptive protagonist, to those of Uchendu, his more thoughtful neighbor. Uchendu addresses a group of villagers debating the appropriate response to the strangers’ arrival: “‘There is no story that is not true,’” he says, deploying the culture’s typically allusive language. “‘The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination among others. We have albinos among us. Do you not think that they came to our clan by mistake, that they have strayed from their way to a land where everybody is like them?’” (141).

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If the world has no end – if it is infinite – then another name for the processes of disintegration that the title of Achebe’s novel evokes is *becoming*, the world’s movement toward new constellations. This becoming is not, like the Enlightenment “perfectibility” that Hegel posits, a disinterested process in which the truth of being would irresistibly reveal itself. Rather, as Achebe’s narrative too suggests, the stakes – political, ethical, and otherwise – may be enormously high as one chooses among the stories, all “true,” clamoring for one’s attention. Thus, Uchendu’s view bespeaks not “cultural relativism,” as the term is pejoratively deployed by contemporary neoconservatives; instead, he promotes a motivated reading of the past that, eschewing the kind of fundamentalism that Okonkwo’s fearfully self-defensive postures bespeak, would help one negotiate the unexpectedness arising in the present. Through an ingenious – and, we should note, dangerous – act of storytelling, he invites the tribesmen to reorganize their world by seeing the new (“white men”) as part and parcel of that which they already know (“albinos”), but an already-known rendered uncanny. In his story, the albinos – the villagers’ neighbors, sisters, brothers – become traces of the unknown in the familiar, requiring a second look, a new reading. Uchendu suggests that the albinos have been inadequately understood, foreign bodies whose familiar strangeness – uncanniness – can help negotiate the disruption that challenges the tribe’s knowledge of the world.

Uchendu’s deployment of storytelling is analogous to Michel Foucault’s advocacy of a genealogical view of history, which he brings to bear particularly in his history of sexuality, a touchstone for many of our contributors. Both Uchendu and Foucault construct motivated narratives that, from the vantage point of an urgent “now,” look to history for usable fragments that can be reactivated in the service of present emergencies. Many of the chapters in this volume repeat this gesture, sometimes demonstrating the ways various writers have sought to re-cognize their own uncanny albinos, sometimes themselves performing this act of invocation. Jointly, the chapters affirm futurities undetermined by teleologies: theirs is an open “now” without a resolution – an *Aufhebung* – in sight.

For this reason, our project remains necessarily incomplete, perhaps “badly” infinite. The historical, geographical, and generic range of possible texts and the lability of representations of same-sex desire – whether under the duress of a homophobic context or in the cultural freedom of a homophilic culture – present a plenitudinous store of exemplars to consider, while both the availability of scholars within particular fields to take on writing a chapter and the material limits for production of this book constrain what it is possible to accomplish in