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## Introduction: What Do We Mean by the Phrase “American Gay and Lesbian Literature”?

How do we compile an institutional history of the phrase “American Gay and Lesbian Literature” as it developed in the U.S. academy? Although we should be cautious of any conclusive moment of origin, one place to start would be a December 27, 1974, forum at the annual Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention in New York City. Titled “Homosexuality and Literature” and moderated by Catharine Stimpson, the panel’s presenters included Louis Crompton, Bertha Harris, and Christopher Isherwood.<sup>1</sup> Each proved to be elemental to gay and lesbian literary studies as it cohered in the late twentieth-century United States. A professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Crompton stoked controversy with a course on the topic of homosexuality. Known for novels such as *A Single Man* (1964) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), Isherwood was an “uncle” of Gay Liberation Front (GLF) activists.<sup>2</sup> Harris published her lesbian-themed novel *Lover* in 1976, and Stimpson established the feminist studies journal *Signs* in 1974. Together these four writers and intellectuals courageously broached subjects such as “The Suppression of Homosexual Literature” and “The Lesbian as Literature” – topics removed from other panels on authors like Boccaccio and John Updike.<sup>3</sup>

This panel and other gay-themed events at the 1974 MLA Convention helped to foster, if not to launch, the study of gay and lesbian literature across the United States. Along with Kent State University professor Dolores Noll, Crompton also organized a session complementary to the “Homosexuality and Literature” forum that resulted in the institutionalization of the Gay Caucus for the Modern Languages. The MLA Executive Council formalized this organization in 1975 and recorded in its Professional Notes and Comments that “Discussion Groups on Children’s Literature and on Gay Studies in Language and Literature shall be established.”<sup>4</sup> Still operative, this group has hosted hundreds of panels on an assortment of topics. Take but three examples: “Homosexuality in Film: *The Celluloid Closet*” in 1982; “The Queer Child” in 1997 with a

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talk on “Psychoanalysis and Race in Asian American Childhood”; and a special session in 2002 on “Queer Atlantics” with presentations on “Black and Queer Geographies” and “The Material and Literary Production of ‘Coming Out’ Narratives in the Americas.”<sup>5</sup> As these eclectic panel titles suggest, the caucus supports cross-disciplinary research under the auspices of “Gay Studies in Language and Literature” by expanding this domain beyond both U.S. borders and the aesthetic medium of literature. This *Companion* does so as well.

That this group emerged in the mid-1970s is also telling: it testifies to a growing excitement inside and outside U.S. academies around the broad topic of “homosexuality and literature.” Archives housed at the University of Nebraska record that Crompton taught one of the nation’s first seminars on “Homophile Studies” at his home institution in the autumn of 1970. This course integrated a section on literature with a bibliography of novels and plays by African American, Chicano, and Anglo American gay male novelists and playwrights, such as James Baldwin, Mart Crowley, and John Rechy.<sup>6</sup> Provisional discussion topics for this class included “The Lesbian Novel,” “Incidental Treatment of Homosexuality in Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner,” and “Modern American Poetry: Crane, Ginsberg, and Auden.”<sup>7</sup> Confirming the richness of gay and lesbian literatures in the midst of national homophobia, Crompton’s course also began to construct and categorize this field according to genre, periodization, gender, literary movement, and, implicitly, nation-state. Although he was not alone in this disciplinary formation, his class stands as a noteworthy moment in the field’s institutional inception.

The 1970s were pivotal, but we should also keep in mind the labors of the years prior. A seminar topic like “The Lesbian Novel” would have been inconceivable without contributions such as Jeannette Howard Foster’s *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, which was self-published in 1956. As Stimpson notes in her influential 1981 essay “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” Foster’s work remains a “pioneering survey of the figure of the lesbian in Western literature.”<sup>8</sup> As a University of Chicago-trained librarian, Foster researched this text, her biographer tells us, “for at least two decades.”<sup>9</sup> On modern lesbian American literature, Foster was prescient, and she singled out Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes. *Sex Variant Women* thus stands as but one fight against the suppression of homosexuality in literature, and it memorializes the risky work of librarians in what is known as the pre-Stonewall era. Honoring these professionals, Foster’s acknowledgements in *Sex Variant Women* state that “an even heavier debt is due all the librarians who made

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available rare or restricted material, negotiated interlibrary loans, or merely rendered much ordinary service.”<sup>10</sup>

We should also not forget the marginalized presence of gay men of color and, especially, lesbians of color from many of these developments. Perhaps another place to mark the embryonic idea of American gay and lesbian literature, then, would be at the MLA Convention two years *after* the “Homosexuality and Literature” forum. As the African American lesbian feminist Barbara Smith recollects in her classic 1977 essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” “at the ‘Lesbians and Literature’ discussion at the 1976 Modern Language Association Bertha Harris suggested that if in a woman writer’s work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature.”<sup>11</sup> Another of Harris’s theories stirred Smith – if women “are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another,” then the said work of literature should be stamped lesbian – and she reformatted this claim in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.”<sup>12</sup> Using Harris’s comments to address matters of race in homoerotic women’s literature, Smith published her article in *Conditions*, a feminist journal devoted to lesbian topics. Here she argues that “all segments of the literary world – whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian – do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist.”<sup>13</sup> She then follows this shattering claim with a close reading of Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel *Sula*.

The same decade that Crompton, Noll, Stimpson, and other white scholars institutionalized gay and lesbian literary studies, African American lesbians such as Smith thus legitimized the homoerotic work of persons of color. As a follow-up to her “Black Feminist” essay, Smith coedited an issue of *Conditions* with Lorraine Bethel entitled *The Black Women’s Issue* in 1979. This volume extended Smith’s earlier claims. Their introduction “disproves the ‘non-existence’ of Black feminist and Black lesbian writers” and notes that the “restrictive effect of racial/sexual politics on Black women’s writing is made clear for us by the fact that at least one lesbian writer felt the need to publish in this issue using a pseudonym.”<sup>14</sup> They find that the issue of same-sex sexuality is “appropriate for courses in women’s literature, Black women writers, lesbian literature, Black women’s studies, lesbian studies, the contemporary women’s movement, feminist theory, etc.”<sup>15</sup>

Essays featured in this fifth issue of *Conditions* were just as innovative as Smith’s introduction. In her piece entitled “‘Under the Days’: The Buried Life and Poetry of Angelina Weld Grimké,” Gloria T. (Akasha) Hull

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analyzed the eroticism in Grimké's poetry. A writer unfairly passed over by literary critics at the time, Grimké appears in Hull's account as one of the Harlem (New Negro) Renaissance's outstanding lesbian poets.<sup>16</sup> In another essay, Ann Allen Shockley made mention of her own 1974 novel *Loving Her* as well as *Ruby*, a 1976 novel "authored by the West Indian writer, Rosa Guy."<sup>17</sup> Although she did not frame her findings in this interpretive light, her essay widened the scope of African American lesbian literature beyond conventional U.S. borders to include a Trinidadian-born writer. In so doing, Shockley situated lesbian literatures by women of color within "diasporic literature," or what the 2002 MLA panel referenced at the outset of this introduction called "Queer Atlanticity."

These accomplishments took place several years before the rise of queer theory and the 1993 publication of the edited collection, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. To their credit, the *Reader's* editors mark this timeline in their introduction: "[W]hat now looks like work in lesbian/gay studies has been going on for well over two decades."<sup>18</sup> They correctly claim, however, that "until now there has been no single, inclusive, cross-disciplinary anthology of scholarly and critical essays in lesbian/gay studies."<sup>19</sup> The *Reader* reprinted the work of Smith and Stimpson and also cited the work of Foster and Crompton in its "Suggestions for Further Reading". Interdisciplinary in scope, it testified to the primacy of American gay and lesbian literature. Entitled "Between the Pages," the *Reader's* final section offered analyses of Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen and pulp novelist Ann Bannon, as well as Cherríe Moraga and Gertrude Stein. In an example of historical continuities between lesbian, gay, and queer literary studies that I have briefly sketched above, Stimpson penned this last piece on Stein.

*The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* is remarkable for the bridge that it established between the lesbian and gay studies of the 1990s and those of earlier decades. At the same time, it documents how American gay and lesbian literary studies absorbed the intellectual apparatus of what is now known as "queer theory" or "queer studies." The editors, in fact, included some of the most prominent queer theorists – Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman, and Teresa de Lauretis, to name but three – and many of these thinkers made their institutional homes in departments of English. Coterminous with the HIV/AIDS crisis (which is conventionally, if problematically, historicized from the early 1980s until the introduction of antiretroviral medications in the later 1990s), queer theory's initial methodology embraced clashing aims. First, it sought greater presence in sexuality studies for sexually nonnormative individuals, such as transgender persons, bisexuals, or heterosexuals who did not identify as lesbian or gay. Second, queer theory treated sexual categorization as a mode of identity

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management. American literature was often used to play out these competing objectives. To cite one example: Sedgwick's 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet* – an indispensable text for U.S. queer theory that is partly excerpted in the *Reader* – offers post-structuralist readings of American-born authors, such as Henry James.

During and after the 1990s, fault lines within queer theory enriched American literary studies as the field further intersected with issues of race, ethnicity, class, region, religion, disability, and nation-state. The *Reader* was percipient on many of these fronts. It notes that “we have reluctantly chosen not to speak here and in our title of ‘queer studies,’ despite our own attachment to the term.”<sup>20</sup> In one of their introduction's penultimate lines, the editors state that “our choice of ‘lesbian/gay’ indicates no wish on our part to make lesbian/gay studies look less assertive, less unsettling, and less queer than it already does.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, with its reprint of the Caribbean American author Audre Lorde's “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” the *Reader* hinted at the soon-to-be-flourishing field of “queer of color theory,” a field that would continue the work of scholars such as Hull and Smith.

This last reference to Lorde's nonfiction piece alerts us to the dynamic status of the adjective “American” in U.S. lesbian, gay, and queer literary study. Throughout her writings, Lorde critiqued the idea of America, and her 1982 memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* references the nation as a lowercase “america.”<sup>22</sup> Some post-World War II writers adopted this stylization to mark their fury with the U.S. nation-state and its oftentimes draconian policies toward minority populations, or what *Zami* refers to as the “hostile surroundings” and “this plastic, anti-human society in which we live.”<sup>23</sup> Lorde consequently points us to the unstable status of “America” as it impacts homoerotic writing and critique.

Writers such as Lorde – as well as many others mentioned in forthcoming chapters – direct us, finally, to the significant roles that internationalism and transnationalism play within the evolving concept of American gay and lesbian literature. So too does this *Companion*, which is composed of authors from three continents and four nations who survey primary and secondary writings under the admittedly inadequate category of “gay and lesbian authorship” in the United States. Their cosmopolitanism extends the intellectual traditions just outlined, and they prove “American Gay and Lesbian Literature” to be an ongoing and malleable concept.

This *Companion* distributes itself across three parts that lay out formal, contextual, and critical parameters of interpretation: (1) genres; (2) historical contexts; and (3) critical approaches. Part I outlines four major genres

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that cut across periodization – novel, drama and performance, poetry, and life writing – and ends with a consideration of American cinema as it does and does not overlap with American literature.

In his chapter on the LGBTQ novel, Michael Cobb's "Queer Novelities" (Chapter 1) explores the pleasures and discomforts that this narrative form affords readers. Examining fiction by James Baldwin, Djuna Barnes, and Michael Cunningham, Cobb argues that the novel supplies queer individuals with a mode of voicing same-sex desire at the same time that it records the frustrations, disappointments, and yearnings of same-sex eroticism and camaraderie. Merging his close readings with insights from some of queer theory's crucial thinkers, Cobb demonstrates that the LGBTQ novel's pleasures lay in and beyond the genre's historical moments: "For the queer novel permits us to be quite novel – novel as in new, as in giving us news about our often confusing, often inchoate understandings of sexuality, which will disturb, no doubt, our senses of time."

In Chapter 2, Sean Metzger focuses on the genre of queer theater and performance and widens this category beyond the stage and into the embodied aesthetics of solo performance and radical queer productions. After offering an overview of avant-garde performance, he then provides a detailed close reading of Richard Greenberg's 2002 Broadway play, *Take Me Out*. By examining how this homoerotic production enables scholars to interrogate intersecting claims about race, ethnicity, nation-state, and sexuality via "queer Asian/American critique," Metzger presents a useful model of how to analyze a queer performance, its reviews, and its larger cultural meanings.

Turning his attention to three centuries of queer poetics, Eric Keenaghan tracks how verse has been essential to recording queer desire across gender, race, and ethnicity. In Chapter 3, which considers a range of works, from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to transgender poet kari edwards's *obedience* (2005), Keenaghan makes a strong case that the genre of poetry enables queers to mark their historical realities-at-hand and to imagine other spaces of same-sex desire. "Poetry," he remarks, "imaginatively supplements those bleak realities, thus making readers conscious of them and ready to transform them." To support this claim, he offers readers a panoply of poetics that highlights works by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, the San Francisco Renaissance poet Jack Spicer, and the Washington, DC-based lesbian-feminist collective The Furies. Although he remains attuned to the historical specifics of these publications, Keenaghan, like Cobb, nonetheless offers a complementary argument that connects these disparate texts: "The actual character of LGBT poetry, like most other poetries, is that it is future-oriented, invested in imagining and articulating life and its possibilities differently from what is currently known."

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Julie Avril Minich's chapter on "Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography and Memoir" (Chapter 4) turns to queer life writing and its commentary on events such as the AIDS epidemic and the corporeal disability that alienates one from normative worlds. This focus enables her "to think about why queer lives matter, about what we might learn from their unusual embodiments and their nonnormative unfoldings in time and space." One example of this dynamic appears in her reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Exploring the appeal for "a new race, / half and half – both woman and man, neither – / a new gender" in *Borderlands*, Minich also teases out how queer disability informs this poetic text.<sup>24</sup> The critical yield of her interpretations becomes obvious: queer writers across gender, class, race, and literary period, she suggests, have reformatted "traditional life events associated with heteronormative constructions of time" into a genre that announces new forms of connection, healing, and embodiment.

Capping this part on genre, Lucas Hilderbrand's contribution, "Queer Cinema, Queer Writing, Queer Criticism" (Chapter 5), addresses how important cinema has become for LGBTQ populations as the visual medium distinguishes itself from its textual compeer. Focusing on a handful of post-Stonewall film adaptations of literary texts – including director Ang Lee's 2005 *Brokeback Mountain*, with a screenplay based on a 1997 short story by E. Annie Proulx; William Friedkin's 1970 *The Boys in the Band*, adapted from the 1968 stage play of the same title; and Isaac Julien's 1989 *Looking for Langston*, based partially on Richard Bruce Nugent's 1926 short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," to name three examples amidst other films that he discusses – Hilderbrand looks at how the genre of film has been useful for visualizing literary representation while also modeling how to analyze queer film "on its own terms." His chapter usefully supplements the literary analyses that precede it.

The second part of this *Companion*, "Historical Contexts," elucidates how lesbian and gay writing responded to historical transitions across decades of aesthetic innovation that the first part gauged. Part II moves chronologically and follows standard historical outlines of sexuality's emergence in the later nineteenth century United States; its growing crystallization in the first half of the twentieth century; and the intensification of political activism in the mid-twentieth century and thereafter. At times, its contributors look beyond this periodization to stress how queerness – as discrete from lesbian and gay social identity – appears outside sexuality's emergence in modern American cultural media.

In his chapter on "Nineteenth-Century Queer Literature" (Chapter 6), for example, Travis Foster suggests that queerness enveloped literary productions for decades before a hetero-/homosexual binary took hold in



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American reading publics. Although Foster does not ignore the impact of this historical construction, he attends to both canonical works, such as Herman Melville's 1851 *Moby-Dick*, and lesser known texts, such as Rose Terry Cooke's 1858 short tale "My Visitation" composed prior to the rise of the field of sexology (the scientific study of sex). In so doing, he explores how literatures in an era of "presexology" recorded same-sex erotics that encompassed desires across the threshold of the living and, in the case of Cooke's tale, the dead.

Turning to the literary and sexual advances produced in the interwar years, Daniela Caselli's chapter (Chapter 7) highlights links between formalist experimentalism; the calcification of hetero- and homosexual identity; and the emergence of lesbian and gay sexual subcultures in globalizing spaces such as twentieth-century New York City. To do so, she provides readers with historicized readings of three major texts of queer American modernism: Richard Bruce Nugent's 1926 short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's 1933 novel *The Young and Evil*, and Djuna Barnes's 1936 *Nightwood* (published in the United States in 1937). Situating these avant-garde texts within cultural milieus such as the Harlem Renaissance, queer scenes of Manhattan, and Parisian lesbian subcultures, Caselli shows that these works grappled with developing norms of sexual and racial identity via innovative aesthetic techniques. As they did so, each of these writers provided audiences of their moment – as well as those to come – with insight into questions of queer childhood, interracial desire, and temporality.

Furthering the historical trajectory begun by Foster and Caselli, Michael P. Bibler's chapter on Cold War-era LGBTQ literatures (Chapter 8) charts how lesbians and gays responded to a conventionally unsympathetic moment in twentieth-century America: the decades immediately before the advent of gay liberation. Intriguingly, Bibler contends that this era was extraordinarily fruitful for LGBTQ literatures, because it saw the reformatting of the closet that Caselli also discusses – the idea that the sexual orientation of queer individuals remains hidden in a predominantly heterosexual society. Surveying literatures by Tennessee Williams, Patricia Highsmith, Ann Bannon, and others, Bibler counterintuitively describes how the social and sexual stranglehold of this cultural era allowed these writers to queer genres such as pulp fiction, the southern gothic novel, postmodernist poetry, and the melodramatic Broadway production.

Guy Davidson's chapter on "The Time of AIDS and the Rise of 'Post-Gay'" (Chapter 9) concludes the "Historical Contexts" part. Focusing on writings from the 1980s to the twenty-first century, Davidson takes up the bearing of the HIV/AIDS crisis on LGBTQ literatures as well as the subsequent



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mainstreaming of LGBTQ communities. With regards to the AIDS crisis, Davidson interprets a wide range of texts, such as Rafael Campo's *The Poetry of Healing* and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*, that each developed unique strategies for navigating fictional and nonfictional accounts of HIV/AIDS. He then turns to several readings of mainstream white gay male authors, such as David Leavitt and Michael Cunningham. Treating a few of their works as exemplary of a growing conservatism among LGBTQ reading publics, Davidson concludes that contemporary queer literatures such as the novels of Samuel R. Delany will nonetheless carry forth "vigorous and diverse" sexual and aesthetic innovation.

Part III, "Critical Approaches," orients readers to five strains of criticism useful for understanding the genres and historical backgrounds of the American gay and lesbian literatures that are outlined in Parts I and II. They encompass: (1) feminist/gender theory; (2) intersectional/queer of color critique; (3) psychoanalytic theory; (4) post-structuralist theory and affect theory; and (5) transnational criticism.

L. H. Stallings's chapter, "Gender and Sexuality" (Chapter 10), explains how LGBTQ criticism emerged as an offshoot of feminist scholarship. After overviewing writings that recuperated forgotten female authors, Stallings then turns to scholarship on race and ethnicity by theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and others that augments these innovations in feminist criticism. These contributions, she suggests, set the stage for later post-structuralist examinations of gender and sexuality as performance (as seen in the writings of Judith Butler); the application of masculinity to female-identified bodies (as seen in the work of Judith [Jack] Halberstam); and the development of queer women of color critique (as seen in the theories of Barbara Smith and Deborah McDowell).

In her chapter on "Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality: Queer of Color Critique" (Chapter 11), Kyla Wazana Tompkins complements Stallings to further the intellectual gains of LGBTQ theories across race and ethnicity. Taking a long historical view of how racialization impacts cultural matters of sexual nonnormativity, Tompkins illuminates that "to be black then was to be always already sexualized as against white citizens and therefore to be always and already deviant." She then details how "queer of color critique articulates queer theory from the heart of these and other histories, although at times it also intervenes in and complicates mainstream and Euro-American queer theory." To do so, she rehearses the findings of theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldúa, David L. Eng, José Esteban Muñoz, and Jasbir Puar, who crafted critical tools for understanding the social damages launched against racialized queers as well as the means for surpassing such hostilities.

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Judith Roof vigilantly walks readers through the uses of psychoanalysis in her chapter, “Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism of Gay and Lesbian American Literature” (Chapter 12). Beginning with Sigmund Freud’s and Carl Jung’s famous 1909 visit to Massachusetts-based Clark University, Roof details how beneficial psychoanalytic thinking has been for LGBTQ scholars and authors. Roof touches on how French feminists incorporated the theories of Jacques Lacan, which were then embraced by American academics; how gay male theory by thinkers such as Leo Bersani and Tim Dean established a generation of new thinking about pleasure and sexual relations; and how works by Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and Lee Edelman have helped us understand identity as a performance and the psycho-social demands placed on queer individuals in a world that often urges biological reproduction.

As a match to Roof’s chapter, Melissa Jane Hardie’s contribution, “Post-Structuralism: Originators and Heirs” (Chapter 13) offers a sharp discussion of how “the perverse orientation of” post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and others influenced the analysis of American literature. Considering deconstruction’s far-reaching impact on the field of queer theory, Hardie grants insight into foundational texts such as the first volume of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, and Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*. She then traces how these texts assisted a critical swerve as queer literary and cultural studies began to explore issues of affect related to LGBTQ works and personages.

Concluding this *Companion*, Martin Joseph Ponce’s “Transnational Queer Imaginaries, Intimacies, Insurgencies” (Chapter 14) addresses critical accounts of American literatures inside and outside U.S. borders. As Ponce writes at the start of his chapter, “to bring to bear a transnational analytic to the study of queer U.S. literature is to interrogate the national frame of ‘America’ as the organizing principle of literary and sexual history and to open up the field to hemispheric, oceanic, postcolonial, and diasporic approaches.” Making good on this claim, Ponce embraces queer literatures from the 1930s to the late twentieth century that theorize the methodology that he identifies as a central aspect of any study of American literature. Importantly, these literary theorizations – enhanced with scholarship by Gloria Anzaldúa, Inderpal Grewal, and Debra A. Castillo, among others – also include discussions of queer Native literatures keen on “dismantling settler colonialism and asserting Native sovereignty.” Fittingly, then, Ponce’s chapter autocritiques the nationalism of U.S. LGBTQ writing that has both informed and, in some instances, thwarted the literary efforts of writers across the genres and the historical periods that the earlier chapters detail. It