

The History of the History of Sexuality

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‘Omit a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks.’ This line from E. M. Forster’s semi-autobiographical novel *Maurice* recalls a memory from his Oxford University education in Victorian England, where a Mr Cornwallis spoke these words as the class were translating Plato’s *Symposium*. The instructor’s contempt, denounced after class by another of the young men, Clive Durham, only encouraged the fictional Maurice to want to learn more. Forster concludes the recollection: ‘He hadn’t known it could be mentioned, and when Durham did so in the middle of the sunlight court a breath of liberty touched him.’¹

Liberty is something historians of sexuality care deeply about. We want to speak what is unspeakable: because we see sex as a universal characteristic of humanity as legitimately worth studying as any other, because we imagine a future where the sexual violence and miseries of human lives can be consigned to the past, and because we take a not-so-secret pleasure in saying aloud what for so long could not be said. As Michel Foucault suggested in the introduction to his *History of Sexuality*, we pride ourselves on being utterly unlike the Victorians when it comes to matters of sex, when so much judged objectionable was hidden away, and there is little that is unspeakable to us. Yet, as Foucault also noted, we are not all that different from those who have come before us, and an obsession to be silent is simply the flipside of the coin of the obsession to speak. A brief foray into the history of the history of sexuality demonstrates how much we owe to our forebears. This chapter focuses primarily on works that appeared in English and before the year 2000, though the field continues to expand exponentially. Many other chapters in the four volumes of this work also discuss the historiography of the chapter’s topic, and include wider-ranging references.

¹ E. M. Forster, *Maurice*, 1971 ed., ch. 7. *Internet Archive Open Library*. <https://openlibrary.org/books/OL4918397M/Maurice>.

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The History of Sexuality from Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century

In meaningful and important ways, the history of sexuality has existed as long as the writing of history. Herodotus (fifth century BCE, Greek), the so-called ‘father’ of history, included numerous reports of what were to him strange and unnatural gender and sexual variations among the peoples of his world. He described the society of the Amazons, for example, where women ruled and led armies and seduced visiting males to father their children. Of the varied peoples of the North African coast, he said that among some, women competed among each other for the greatest number of lovers; among others, newly married brides were enjoyed sexually by all the male guests at the wedding. And he recounted in detail the peculiar custom of the Babylonians, where all women were obliged to have sex with a male stranger at least once in their lives, in honour of their fertility goddess. Much of what Herodotus said may not have been accurate, though he is sometimes our only historical source for information on the societies he depicted, and the very existence of some societies, such as the Amazons, has been questioned. But we do learn from him how much sexual differences lay at the heart of how human cultures, past and present, have understood each other.

As with Herodotus, comments on the sexual customs of others often took a gossipy tone – or at least, that is how their disapproval sometimes sounds to us. They set boundaries between the familiar and the strange, but they also hinted or stated outright that the same boundaries divided natural from unnatural, orderly from chaotic, civilized from primitive, virtuous from wicked, or divinely sanctioned from depraved in overlapping binaries. We see this censure also in the classic historian of China, Sima Qian (second to first century BCE, Han Chinese). He wished to damn the memory of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, and chose to besmirch the sexual reputation of the man’s mother to do so. The queen dowager, he wrote, had a lover named Lao Ai – whose very name means ‘lustful misdeed’ – and he lived in her apartments, disguised as a eunuch, and serviced her with his large penis. The clear intention was to cast doubt on Qin Shi Huang’s legitimacy as ruler with this story of a wanton mother.

Sima Qian’s disapproving words fell most heavily on women, reminding us that the histories of gender and sexuality have always been entwined. We see a similar denunciation of Aspasia, female companion

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to the Athenian general Pericles, in the history of Thucydides (fifth century BCE, Greek), another of the earliest historians. Aspasia may have been a sex worker and brothel owner, though her contemporaries were so hostile to her because of her influence on Pericles that most things said about her must be questioned. According to Kalhana (eleventh century CE, North Indian), often called the first historian of India, the wicked Queen Didda of Kashmir murdered her own son and grandsons in order to remain regent, and then made her lowborn lover, Tunga, her first minister. Here, as elsewhere, women's rejection of traditional roles in one domain, whether domestic, sexual, or political, spilled over into others in how they were remembered. The early Japanese female ruler Himiko refused to marry and create an heir, according to the *Wei Chih* (Records of Wei, third century CE, Chinese), and thus bore responsibility for the civil strife after her death.

There is a moral tone that pervades much of pre-modern history, then, and charges of sexual immorality played particularly well in denunciations of public figures. We see it in the biographies by Suetonius (first to second century CE, Roman), who accused almost all early Roman emperors of sexual misconduct of one sort or another, including Nero and Caligula for adultery, incest, and unbridled sexual violence. Christian historians of the Middle Ages did the same. Gregory of Tours (sixth century CE, Gallo-Roman) detailed how appalled he was at the sexual brutality and promiscuity of the Frankish rulers of his day, both male and female. And though Sihavathi is the mythical ancestor of the Sinhala kings in the anonymous *Mahavamsa* or *Great Chronicle* (fifth century CE, Sri Lanka), she was denounced for her mating with a lion.

Much the same moralistic tone in historians' writings about sexuality continued through the nineteenth century. It suggests that a primary purpose of remembering the past through the ages was to provide a moral compass to those living in the present, in sexual behaviour as in all aspects of life. A few examples will suffice from the hundreds more that might be given. Ibn Khaldun (fourteenth century CE, Arab), in his history of the Muslim Mediterranean called the *Muqaddimah*, considered male same-sex love as a sign of urban decadence and as a threat to population growth, and that it was responsible accordingly for the fall of empires of the past. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (seventeenth century CE, Mexican), writing a history of his Aztec ancestors, likewise wrote approvingly and in graphic detail about the execution of males found guilty of having sex with one another even before the conquest of the Aztecs by the Spanish. Jacob Burkhardt

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(nineteenth century CE, Swiss), in his famous history of the Italian Renaissance, saw lust and pornography as having indelibly corrupted the humanistic ideals of the era.

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It was only in the nineteenth century that the history of sexual behaviours became more than blanket praise of past virtues or condemnation of past vices. Advocates of women's rights and of sexual and gender minority rights mostly in Europe began to publish historical tracts that challenged conventional notions of male, heterosexual, and cisgender hegemonies as natural human conditions. A true pioneer was the American novelist and anti-slavery advocate Maria Lydia Child, whose two-volume *The History of the Condition of Women in Various Ages and Places* (1835) attempted a global survey of women's status in private and public life, though coloured by the ethnic biases of her day. The American journalist Margaret Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845, drawing from history to argue that her contemporaries should seize the opportunity to remove the social prejudices of the past, including in gender and marital inequalities, and create a new age for themselves. By the last decades of the century, the movement we now call first-wave feminism appealed for women's equality not only in voting rights but also in marriages and inheritance laws, detailing past wrongs within various national traditions.² These publications demonstrate how activism for gender and sexual equality in the here and now has long served as the backdrop to new directions in the history of sexuality.

In the first decades of the twentieth century came the first global histories focused on sexuality rather than women's rights. The Swede Ellen Key and the Russian-born American Emma Goldman both published books in 1911 on the history of marriage.³ At about the same time the Englishman Edward Carpenter published books about gender and sexual variance with considerable historical and cross-cultural content, including *The Intermediate Sex* (1912) and *Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk* (1919).⁴ And the German

2 See, e.g., Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1881–1922).

3 Ellen Key, *Love and Marriage*, trans. Arthur G. Chater (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1911); Emma Goldman, *Marriage and Love* (New York: Mother Earth, 1911).

4 Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (New York: Kennerley, 1912); Edward Carpenter, *Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1919).

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Magnus Hirschfeld published an academic journal between 1897 and 1923, the *Annual for Intermediate Sexual Types* (*Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*) that highlighted gender and sexual diversity throughout history and across the world.⁵

The founding of the Annales school of history in France also occasioned new perspectives on the history of sexuality. The aim of the movement, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, was to expand history beyond the study of politics and the lives of the famous and to consider everyday individuals and ordinary events as legitimate subjects of history. Bloch devoted a chapter of his *Feudal Society* to family life and kinship, and though much of it dealt with inheritance, marriage, and naming conventions, he situated these customs within a framework of interpersonal bonds, noting, albeit briefly, both sexual violence and intimacy between married couples. And Febvre returned repeatedly to Luther's views on marriage in his famous biography of the man, seeing in Luther's rejection of clerical celibacy and monastic chastity apt symbols of the impact of the Reformation on the real lives of Christians. The Annalists' use of *mentalités* – by which they meant broad patterns of collective thought – was particularly helpful as a means for historians to move from basic facts about human lives to the social meanings and ideological assumptions behind them. Together with their championing of diverse types of historical sources, from court cases to popular myths, the Annalists lay much of the groundwork for historians of sexuality today.

The new legitimacy of historical studies of private lives gave rise to what was perhaps the first series of books dedicated to the history of sexuality, published by Routledge of London. The series included the Polish-born British anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), followed by German-born American Indologist Johann Jakob Meyer's *Sexual Life in Ancient India* (1930), German classicist Hans Licht's *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (1932), and German lawyer Otto Kiefer's *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (1935), followed many years later by Dutch Sinologist Robert van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (1961) and Danish Egyptologist Lisa Manniche's *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (1987). Both Licht (a pseudonym

⁵ Magnus Hirschfeld wrote prolifically, and many of his books and articles have been translated into English; see James D. Steakley, *The Writings of Magnus Hirschfeld: A Bibliography* (Toronto: Canadian Gay Archives, 1985).

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for Paul Hans Brandt) and Otto Kiefer were important advocates for homosexual rights in Germany, demonstrating once again the close connections between scholarship and activism in the field.

Women's histories in the twentieth century also increasingly emphasized women's sexual lives. The British scholar Gertrude Stern, for example, explored the lives of the first Muslim women in her *Marriage in Early Islam*, published in 1939. The French writer Simone de Beauvoir, though not a professional historian, stands out for her historical study of women's repression, *The Second Sex (Le deuxième sexe)*, 1949, which placed women's sexuality front and centre in her analysis, including erotic desires and reproductive rights as means of women's oppression in the past and as mechanisms for their liberation in the present. Many early scholars of women's history researched and wrote within national traditions and provided us with fascinating glimpses into the infinite variations of human history, including aspects related to sexuality. Chen Dongyuan, author of *A History of the Lives of Chinese Women* (1928), included topics such as romance, footbinding, and the cult of female chastity alongside marriage, education, and political rights.⁶ Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919) and Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (1930), both of which focused on Britain, included discussions of marriage patterns and sexual behaviours along with economic issues.⁷ Some reached for a more transnational perspective. The American historian Mary Beard authored the pioneering work *Women as a Force in History* (1946), in which she examined women's success despite their subjection to men in varied ways, from laws and business to marriage rights. Yet she confined her analysis to Europe and America, albeit from antiquity to her own day. She later published *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (1953), which attempted the same sort of analysis in a different world region, focused on individual women, including Yodogimi, the mistress of a sixteenth-century shogun, and Shizue Ishimoto Kato, a twentieth-century advocate for birth control.⁸ As these early works reflect, it was not really possible to write women's history without examining sexuality.

6 Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi (A History of the Lives of Chinese Women)* (Shanghai, 1928). The modern section of the book has been translated into English in Carol Evelyn Johnson, 'A History of the Life of Chinese Women – The Development of Chinese Feminism' (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1970).

7 Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1919); Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1760–1850* (London: Routledge, 1930).

8 Mary Beard, *Women as a Force in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1946); Mary Beard, *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 1953).

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The History of Sexuality in the Second Half
 of the Twentieth Century

The ‘second-wave’ feminist movement that began in the 1960s inspired a huge outpouring of women’s history that has not stopped since.⁹ Many of these works incorporated sexuality. The Jamaican historian Lucille Mathurin Mair in *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies during Slavery* (1975) emphasized race and class alongside gender roles, and included informal as well as formal unions in describing sexual relationships in the Caribbean past.¹⁰ Scholarship from this period often focused on women’s search for sexual agency. Australian historian Miriam Dickson’s *The Real Matilda* (1976), for example, considered the colonial past as having deformed sexual and romantic intimacies between Australian men and women in ways that persisted throughout that nation’s history.¹¹ A widely read article by American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1980), reminded us that through much of history women, unlike men, did not control their bodies or sexual choices, so that we cannot read much about the genuine sexual desires of historical women even if we know something of their sexual relationships.¹²

Historians of women increasingly began to discuss the ways in which systems of sexual differentiation affected both women and men, and by the early 1980s used the word ‘gender’ to describe these culturally constructed and historically changing systems. Scholars interested in this new perspective asserted that gender was an appropriate category of analysis when looking at *all* historical developments, not just those involving women. Every political, intellectual, religious, economic, social, and even military change had an impact on gender systems, and, conversely, a culture’s gender structures influenced every other structure or development. Gender history joined women’s history as an academic field, and one in which sexuality often figured prominently.¹³ The earliest gender histories tended to focus on

9 See Mary Spongberg, *Writing Women’s History since the Renaissance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

10 Lucille Mair, *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies during Slavery* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1975).

11 Miriam Dickson, *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia, 1788 to 1975* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1976).

12 Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Signs* 5, no.4 (1980): 631–60.

13 See Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder/Arnold, 2010); and Teresa A. Meade and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *A Companion to Global Gender History*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 2020).

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Europe and North America, but studies of other parts of world soon followed.¹⁴

Also in the 1960s and 1970s, with the advent of the gay rights movement, came the first books on gay history. These included broad transhistorical and cross-cultural surveys, such as the Belgian Raymond de Becker's *The Other Face of Love* (1967), the Englishman Alfred L. Rowse's *Homosexuals in History* (1977), and the American Vern L. Bullough's *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (1976) and his *Homosexuality: A History* (1979), as well as more specialized studies focused on a particular time and place.¹⁵ The *Journal of Homosexuality* first appeared in 1976, and in its first year included articles on sodomy in the British navy, the medieval European prosecution of sexual and religious unorthodoxies, and use of the death penalty for sodomy in colonial America.¹⁶ Most of these early histories of homosexuality buried the histories of bisexuality and transgenderism, as well as the histories of other sexual and gender minorities, within a framework defined solely as 'homosexual' or 'lesbian' history. John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980), on sexuality from ancient Rome to the European Middle Ages, championed the use of 'gay' to refer to any 'persons who are conscious of erotic inclination toward their own gender', including participants in classical pederasty and cross-dressing or intersex individuals in sexual relationships as well as activities between roughly equivalent partners of the same sex and gender identities, both male and female.¹⁷

Given the nature of the sources, many histories of male homosexuality focused on sex crimes. This was especially true for scholars of early modern

14 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Lenore Masterson and Margaret Jolly, eds., *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Nancy Rose Hunt, Tessie P. Liu, and Jean Quataert, eds., *Gendered Colonialisms in African History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

15 Raymond de Becker, *The Other Face of Love*, trans. Margaret Crosland and Alan Daventry (1967; New York: Grove, 1969); Alfred L. Rowse, *Homosexuals in History: A Study of Ambivalence in Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976); Vern L. Bullough, *Homosexuality: A History* (New York: New American Library, 1979).

16 Arthur N. Gilbert, 'The Africaine Courts-Martial: A Study of Buggery and the Royal Navy', *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no. 1 (1976): 111–22; Vern L. Bullough, 'Heresy, Witchcraft, and Sexuality', *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no. 2 (1976): 183–99; Louis Crompton, 'Homosexuals and the Death Penalty in Colonial America', *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no. 3 (1976): 277–93; Michael Goodich, 'Sodomy in Medieval Secular Law', *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no. 3 (1976): 295–302; Michael Goodich, 'Sodomy in Medieval Ecclesiastical Law and Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no. 4 (1976): 427–34.

17 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 44.

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Europe. Michael Rocke's *Forbidden Friendships* (1996) is a classic of this sort, using the records left by a special commission in Florence called the Office of the Night and created in 1432 to investigate sodomy, to construct a context of a certain lifestyle for men of the era. It represents perhaps the most detailed of similar studies that began to be published in the late 1980s for a host of European regions.¹⁸ Others contributed to the growing field simply by publishing collections of historical documents long hidden: pioneers in this work in the English language were Leslie Parr with *Documents of the Homosexual Rights Movement in Germany, 1835–1927* (1975) and Jonathan Ned Katz with *Gay American History* (1976).¹⁹

Scholars of female homosexuality, faced with far fewer and different types of sources, focused instead on interpersonal relationships. An article of 1975 by the American historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', invited scholars to see women's intimate relationships as a spectrum between friendship and eroticism.²⁰ This notion was extended by the American scholar Lilian Faderman in her *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981).²¹ The British historian Alan Bray offered a model of how scholars of male homosexuality might also benefit from this approach, with his reading of texts about male friendships alongside legal and criminal records about sodomy.²²

The monikers 'gay' and 'lesbian' were challenged by the social constructionist controversies of the 1980s and 1990s. Homosexual identity, the argument went, is a modern reality 'socially constructed' or derived from modern social forces. Inhabitants of the pre-modern world experienced a variety of sexual desires – heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual – but did not use our modern categories of identity to understand themselves, and so it is anachronistic and 'essentialist' to apply these or other labels of sexual identity to them. The first to make the argument was the British sociologist Mary

18 Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Kent Gerard, ed., *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

19 Leslie Parr, ed., *Documents of the Homosexual Rights Movement in Germany, 1835–1927* (New York: Arno, 1975); and Jonathan Ned Katz, ed., *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976).

20 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1–29.

21 Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Morrow, 1981).

22 Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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McIntosh in a brief but important article, ‘The Homosexual Role’ (1968). She used a combination of Kinsey statistics, anthropological studies of world cultures, and historical work on early modern England to reach her conclusion.²³ Social constructionism was taken up by many others, at first especially by sociologists, including British Kenneth Plummer, Canadian Gary Kinsman, and American David Greenberg, as well as famously by American classicist David Halperin.²⁴ In the wake of the debates, historians of sexuality tended to assume dissimilarities rather than similarities between modern and pre-modern individuals. The study of ‘homosexuality’ per se mostly disappeared, replaced by studies of ‘homoeroticism’ or ‘same-sex sexuality’, the change in terminology signalling the author’s wish not to conflate past and present identities.

The debate stemmed in part from the extraordinary impact of the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault on the history of sexuality. Foucault planned a *History of Sexuality* series in seven volumes, but only published three volumes before his death. It was the first volume, *The Will to Knowledge* (*La volonté de savoir*, 1976), focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, that created the most stir, though the second and third volumes, *The Use of Pleasure* (*L’usage des plaisirs*, 1984) and *The Care of the Self* (*Le souci de soi*, 1984), on ancient Athens and Rome, respectively, generated considerable debates among classicists. Foucault challenged historians of sexuality not to assume direct connections between past and present sexualities. He set the terms for much of the field through his investigation of the varied discourses around sex: ancient guides on interpreting dreams, Catholic confessional literature of the Counter-Reformation, and nineteenth-century medical treatises. He encouraged us all to reflect on which aspects of sexuality get talked about in any given period and which do not. Though Foucault has been criticized most harshly by feminist historians, even today his ideas remain central to the field.²⁵

In a class of her own is Reay Tannahill, who published *Sex in History* in 1980. A Scottish romance novelist, she also wrote non-fiction about varied

²³ Mary McIntosh, ‘The Homosexual Role’, *Social Problems* 16, no. 2 (1968): 182–92.

²⁴ Kenneth Plummer, ed., *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Hutchinson, 1981); Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada* (Toronto: Black Rose Books, 1987); David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); David Halperin, ed., *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. chs. 1 and 2. See also John D’Emilio, ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’, in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review, 1983), 100–13.

²⁵ On Foucault, see Chapter 6 by Michael Behrent in this volume.