

"Deviance, Inversion and Unnatural Love:" Lesbians in Canadian Media, 1950-1970¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of lesbians in English Canadian print media in the 1950s and 1960s. The author discusses the increase in media attention towards homosexuality in the 1950s, and explores the portrayal of lesbians in these early articles in relation to the prevailing gender ideologies of the period.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie la façon dont les lesbiennes ont été représentées dans la presse canadienne-anglaise des années 50 et 60. L'auteure discute de l'intérêt grandissant des médias envers l'homosexualité dans les années 50 et explore le portrait qu'on a fait des lesbiennes dans ces premiers articles en faisant le lien avec les idéologies gendéristes de l'époque.

"THE LOVE THAT DARES NOT SPEAK ITS NAME"

Prior to 1950, there was a virtual silence on the subject of homosexuality in North American media. Although there were occasional vague references to effeminate male actors and artists, homosexuality was considered too immoral to be mentioned in the media, and some newspapers and television stations even had explicit policies banning the subject.

Around 1950, this silence gradually began to be broken. There are a number of reasons for this increase in media attention. First, public discussion of sexuality in general began to increase in this period. The Kinsey report on male sexuality was published in 1948, followed by the companion study of female sexuality in 1953. These books, and others such as Frank Caprio's *Female Homosexuality*, published in 1954, as well as the *Wolfenden Report* released by the British government in 1954, attracted media attention and created some public debate on the issue of homosexuality (Kinsman 139-143). Historian Vern Bullough has written that, "[t]hrough the general public accepted the importance of the [Kinsey] study," it received a great deal of criticism in academic circles (180). Kinsey's statistics on the frequency of homosexual activity were highly

controversial, particularly those related to women (Kinsman 114). Gary Kinsman has argued that Kinsey's studies were the first widespread challenge to heterosexism, and that they had a large influence on Canadian popular literature on homosexuals throughout the 1950s and 1960s. One of the most important results of Kinsey's work was that it "demonstrated that homosexual activity was widespread in the American population" (Bullough 176-77). The Kinsey studies also demonstrate an increasing interest in sex as a subject for popular and media discussion.

Another factor contributing to the increase in the media visibility of lesbians and gay men in the 1950s was the growth of lesbian and gay communities in major urban centres. During World War Two, many people acquired independence through leaving their families and gaining paid employment. Many lesbians and gay men met other homosexuals through military service and factory work. Historians Alan Bérubé (1990, 256) and Donna Penn (1994, 364) have argued that the independence from families and the opportunity to live with other women during World War Two made it easier for some women to live as homosexuals. Gay communities had existed in cities prior to the 1950s, but there was a rapid growth in homosexual bar culture and social

networks at this time (Kinsman 144). The growth of urban lesbian and gay communities in this post-war era led to increased social visibility, which in turn led to both increased media attention and increased persecution (Davis and Kennedy 69). Because gays and lesbians were more visible than ever before, they began to be perceived as a threat by society, media and government agencies. These fears about the perceived spread of homosexuality led to an increase in violence against lesbians and gays, usually in the form of street bashings, increased harassment and persecution of lesbians and gays by the police and government, and an increase in media articles denouncing homosexuality (Kinsman 145-146).²

The majority of the newspaper and magazine articles about homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s referred solely to gay men. Lesbians were rarely mentioned, and the term "homosexual," when used in media articles in this period, refers primarily to men, thus reinforcing the social invisibility of lesbians in this period. When journalists did refer to lesbians, they would generally use the term "women homosexuals," or occasionally "lesbians," although this word was not commonly used even by lesbians until the mid to late 1960s. The term "heterosexual" is also uncommon in these articles. Generally, the word "normal" is used to refer to heterosexuality. References to bisexuality were also very rare in articles from this period. The only references to bisexuality, as we understand it today, are in relation to someone with both masculine and feminine characteristics, or to homosexuals, particularly femme lesbians, who have been "cured," or become heterosexual. Even in these cases, the individual is generally not defined as bisexual. Rather, the woman is seen as essentially heterosexual or "normal," but as having been weak, lacking in judgement, or seduced by a "real" lesbian.

Although there were only a handful of articles on homosexuality published during this period, they were extremely significant. These articles from the 1950s and 1960s were among the first explicit public discussions of homosexuality and lesbianism in Canadian media, and undoubtedly influenced how the public viewed gay men and lesbians. It is,

however, very difficult to determine what impact these articles had. For many people, these popular media articles were their first and only source of information about homosexuality. As Gary Kinsman notes, "[u]ntil recently, people rarely encountered visible gays or lesbians. All images were those projected by the media and those circulating in the popular culture"(29). And as media theorist Marguerite Moritz has argued, "[w]hen the news media...represent a topic with which the mass audience may have little personal experience, and homosexuality is no doubt in that category, the message is particularly potent" (157).

HOMOSEXUALITY AS A "SOCIAL PROBLEM"

The majority of mainstream media articles from the 1950s and 1960s identified homosexuality as a "threat" or "social problem." In addition, almost all journalists unquestioningly accepted medical explanations of homosexuality, which defined homosexuality as an illness or disease. This medical model, which developed during the 1920s and 1930s, had become the dominant ideology in academic and popular literature on the subject of homosexuality by the 1950s (Khayatt 22). Many of these articles conveyed the notion that homosexuality was rapidly increasing or "spreading." Because homosexuality was usually viewed as a disease, many journalists made comparisons to plagues and contagious illnesses, particularly sexually transmitted diseases. For example, this passage is taken from an article published in 1951 in the magazine *Canadian Home Journal*, entitled, "The Problem That is Never Mentioned:"

...although lesbianism is a very different matter from venereal disease, there is the same need to have more than a vague and horrified notion of what it is if we are to understand and help to solve the social problem it presents.

(Cameron 12)

Because homosexuality was perceived as a mental illness or a disease, it was considered to be curable. Thus, the popular literature on homosexuality

primarily focussed on finding causes and postulating possible methods of prevention, and treatment.

Although lesbians were considered to be "deviant," "abnormal," and "morally diseased," the so-called "homosexual problem," as constructed by the media, referred primarily to male homosexuality. While lesbians were reviled in the media, they were not considered to be as dangerous to society as gay men, and thus received less media attention. Gary Kinsman notes that lesbians were given less media attention partly because, unlike male homosexuals, their activities were not illegal, and thus there were no arrests or court cases to report (17). Certainly, lesbians were rarely arrested for "indecent" or public sex acts as gay men were. Other reasons for the invisibility of lesbians in the media compared to gay men include the invisibility of women in the media overall, and the popular notion that women are basically emotional rather than sexual and thus have no sexuality at all without men. In a 1966 *Chatelaine* article, an "expert" is quoted as saying that for lesbians, "[j]ust as with other women, the emotional-supportive relationship counts more than the sex act" (Wilson 131).

In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which was published in 1953, Kinsey and his colleagues state that, "[i]nterestingly enough, there is much less public concern over homosexual activities among females [than among males]" (477). Kinsey attributed differences in the public perception of gay men and lesbians to several factors, including the fact that there are fewer formal religious sanctions against female homosexuality than against male homosexuality; their belief that homosexual activity was less common among women than among men; social taboos against anal sex; public ignorance of lesbian sexual practices; the fear of paedophilia; and their finding that many men found the idea of lesbianism arousing (485-486). The Kinsey report concluded that, "[w]hen a female's homosexual experience interferes with her becoming married or maintaining a marriage into which she has entered, social interests may be involved" (486). Thus, lesbianism was only seen as socially important, or as a potential threat, in the event that it affected

men, the institution of the family, or the socialization of children.

Finally, as Didi Khayatt has argued:

...another plausible speculation [for the invisibility of lesbians] is that men's interest in women's sexual behavior is frequently limited to regulating it to ensure legitimate heirs, to control their access to women's sexuality and labor, and to maximize their own pleasure. Laws and customs reflect the central position men have reserved for themselves, particularly in sexual matters. (13)

BUTCHES, FEMMES, AND "GENDER INVERTS"

Although the "social problem" of homosexuality, as presented in the media, was attributed mostly to gay men, journalists also considered lesbians and lesbianism itself to be potentially dangerous. In particular, butch lesbians were frequently depicted as sexual predators who would corrupt "innocent" heterosexual women. A news article published in the *Globe and Mail* in 1963 stated that, "[a] policewoman who ventured in to the Jukebox Club on Yonge St., which was a hangout for lesbians, was warned she would be raped by another woman if she went into the washroom" (Warson 13). In many articles from the 1950s and 1960s, a clear distinction is made between "active" lesbians, who are aggressive and "mannish" in appearance, and "passive" lesbians, who are more traditionally feminine in appearance.³ These categories of "active" and "passive" were borrowed from articles on sexuality and homosexuality published in psychology journals, as was much of the other information on homosexuality imparted to readers of mainstream media (McCreary 63-74). Passive lesbians were usually said to have been seduced by active lesbians, often someone older, more confident and more experienced. In this way, butch or "active" lesbians were characterized as being more sinister and dangerous than their femme counterparts, who appeared less threatening to the status quo, as they did not transgress their assigned gender roles.⁴

Often, informed by the medical model of

lesbianism prevalent at the time, journalists did not accept that feminine-looking women could be lesbians at all. These femme or "passive" lesbians were said to be more easily "cured," or restored to heterosexuality than "mannish" lesbians. *Canadian Home Journal* offered the following advice to parents:

...psychiatric treatment...is easier and more apt to be successful if it is begun soon rather than late. In the special case of lesbianism, its chances of success are on the whole greater where the tendency is toward a passive role rather than an active one, and greatest of all where there has never been any physical act of unnatural love. (Cameron 105)

Chatelaine readers were told that, "[f]emmes are more pliable and passive, often swinging in and out of lesbianism, and sometimes ending up in a normal heterosexual marriage" (Wilson 134). Sometimes femme lesbians were not considered to be true lesbians at all, since the medical model dictated that some degree of gender inversion was an inherent characteristic of all lesbians (Terry 320-21). Rather, these femme women were perceived as merely weak, having been led astray by an aggressive lesbian. Femme women were frequently portrayed as naïve, innocent, and even somewhat stupid. One "passive" lesbian, referred to as "a pretty little creature," is described in the following way:

At first Mary was too innocent to understand why Agatha was forever calling her up...[e]ven when Agatha began kissing her as a man might, Mary still didn't understand. But Agatha dominated her by the force of her personality, and talked her into accepting an unnatural relationship...[Mary] went to live with her as her wife - a submissive and dependent wife, who relies on Agatha not only for her keep but for advice and guidance in everything she does and thinks.

(Cameron 103)

This passage is said to describe a "composite portrait of many such cases" (Cameron 12). That

this fictitious description is seen as a typical portrait of lesbianism clearly shows the misogyny which informed media representations of lesbianism. In accordance with sexist ideology, masculinity is equated with aggression, and femininity is linked to passivity, ignorance and spinelessness. Any woman who does not display "ideal" feminine characteristics is defined as mannish or a "third sex," and not a woman at all, and any feminine-looking woman who has sex with other women is assumed to have been seduced or tricked, rather than having acted out of free will. As historian Jennifer Terry has written, sexual initiative was seen as an inherently masculine trait, so the idea of a sexually assertive, feminine woman was inconceivable (32).

While femme women were not seen as "real" lesbians, butch women were not seen as "real" women. Generally, their lesbianism was not viewed as a sexual preference, but as a rejection of femininity and womanhood. One supposed expert clearly stated that, "the butch type especially wants 'not to be a woman'" (Wilson 104). In articles from this period, lesbians were primarily condemned for breaking gender roles, rather than for their sexual behaviour, which was generally ignored. Lesbians were identified as socially dangerous and mentally ill because they were seen as unfeminine or a "third sex." This explains why femme lesbians were not considered "real" lesbians; lesbianism was seen to be primarily about gender, rather than about sexuality. As Terry states, "it was basically assumed that lesbian sexual desire was an *effect* produced by the female sex variant's masculinity" (322). Thus, it was the lesbian's atypical gender role which was seen as the root of her problem, rather than her sexuality, which was viewed as a symptom of her gender "inversion" or "confusion." In fact, lesbian historians Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy argue that it was around 1950 that the popular and medical definition of lesbianism began to shift. They argue that prior to the mid 1940s:

...[g]ender was so identified with sexuality that it was not choice of a partner of the "same sex" that indicated homosexuality, but the taking on of the role of the "opposite sex" in the pursuit of sexual relations with the "same sex." (325)

SEX RESEARCH AND JOURNALISM: SEARCHING FOR A CAUSE

As lesbianism was popularly considered to be a medical or psychological condition, journalists usually got their information on the subject from doctors, mental health professionals, and other so-called "experts." Media articles relied heavily on this "expert" advice, and quoted frequently from books and interviews. By appealing to science and quoting statistics, journalists attempted to establish their own objectivity and credibility on the subject of homosexuality. Medical experts, almost all of whom were male, were considered the authorities on the subject of lesbianism, and the opinions of lesbians themselves were rarely even mentioned.

Since heterosexuality was assumed to be an inherent characteristic, journalists frequently endeavoured to explain to readers how lesbianism was caused. One article stated that, "[f]ree choice is also thought not to be a factor except in circumstances such as prisons where normal sex is impossible" (Wilson 132). The supposed causes suggested by psychologists and sexologists and upheld by journalists, included glandular abnormalities, genetic disorders, hormonal imbalances, and birth defects. Occasionally, traumatic experiences with men were listed as a cause, but this is usually attributed to a young woman's irrational, paranoid fears, rather than to a truly negative experience (Wilson 134 and Cameron 103). However, by far the most frequent "cause" of lesbianism presented in media articles during this period is parental failure, usually on the part of the mother.

Both overprotectiveness and a lack of attention by mothers were cited as causes of lesbianism, as were too much and too little affection between parents. A mother could be too negative about sex, and turn her daughter off men, or she could be too frank and explicit, which would have the same effect. According to the psychological and medical literature of the time, appropriate gender role modelling by parents was the most important factor in ensuring "normal" heterosexual development in children (Terry 336). Media articles informed readers that a mother who was too overbearing or dominant, disagreed with or criticized her husband,

or worked outside of the home could turn her daughters into lesbians. Similarly, a father who was weak or "ineffectual" would not provide a proper male role model, and cause his daughter to despise men and become a lesbian (Wilson 134). One article informed readers that a girl's father "should often play the kind of rousing and affectionate games with her which stress his masculinity," but too much of this activity was considered equally dangerous, as it could turn a girl into a "hardbitten tomboy" (Cameron 104). This advice to mothers served to uphold traditional gender roles, heterosexuality and the nuclear family model by suggesting that mothers, and to some extent fathers, who did not conform could damage their children. Although these articles may seem laughable to readers in the 1990s, similar messages can be found in contemporary articles which warn against the dangers of single mothers or lesbian mothers raising children without male role models.

"REBELLIOUS TOMBOYS:" REJECTING SEX ROLES

Feminist historians have established that in the post-World War Two era, heterosexuality and "family life" were vigorously promoted in North America, to compensate for the massive social changes which occurred during the war and to promote consumer spending.⁵ Donna Penn and others have argued that World War Two gave more women the opportunity to live as lesbians, and the vigorous promotion of the heterosexual nuclear family in the media during this period can be seen as a reaction against the social changes which gave women this kind of independence (219). Heterosexual marriage was presented as the only "normal" situation for women. Gaye Tuchman demonstrates this promotion of compulsory heterosexuality through the mass media:

[s]tudying a random sample of issues of *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*, between the years 1940 and 1970, Helen Franzwa found four roles for women: "single and looking for a husband, housewife-mother, spinster, and widowed or divorced - soon to remarry." All the women

were defined by the men in their lives, or by their absence. (177)

Although I did not undertake a comprehensive survey of the roles presented for women in Canadian media, it is obvious that lesbianism was not presented as a viable alternative to the heterosexual nuclear family. Rather, heterosexual marriage was considered not only the ideal role for women, but was generally seen as essential for women's happiness. Unmarried women, when they appeared in the media at all, were frequently portrayed as bitter, unhappy, and, most importantly, abnormal. Just as in the American magazines analysed by Helen Franzwa, the images of women presented in Canadian media, both in articles and advertisements, were exclusively heterosexual roles. When lesbians were presented, they were either vilified or seen as objects of pity, and of the few articles which did discuss lesbianism, most had an explicit agenda of teaching mothers how to detect and prevent this "disorder" (Cameron 103-106 and Wilson 134). The 1966 *Chatelaine* article even suggests that the "butch" lesbian may be "in rebellion against the social indignities of women; she sees her mother's way of life as not desirable, as lacking in respect and independence" (Wilson 134). This does acknowledge that women suffer "social indignities," but rather than suggesting that women may truly need more independence and respect, readers were given the following advice, in order to prevent their daughters from becoming lesbians:

...a mother can ask herself: have I taught my daughter that being a woman is a fine rewarding thing which carries joy and fulfilment, or have I stressed the negative aspects such as painful childbirth, "giving in" to demanding males, and so on?

(Wilson 134)

This passage is ambiguous, because while it shows that lesbianism was interpreted as a rebellion against traditional feminine roles, it is again suggested that mothers who question their feminine gender role to any degree will produce "abnormal" daughters.

LESBIANS IN THE "YELLOW PRESS"

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, tabloid newspapers, such as Toronto's *Justice Weekly*, *True News Times*, *Tab*, and *Hush*, frequently printed articles on homosexuality, primarily for the shock value the subject carried (Egan 12). Because of this, most of the coverage of homosexuality in the so-called "yellow press" was extremely inflammatory, and often fictitious or exaggerated. When gay men were charged with "gross indecency," and when gay bars were raided, these tabloids printed the names of those arrested, in order to capitalize on scandal and sensationalism.

Although the coverage of homosexuality in the tabloids was largely judgmental and lurid, Jim Egan has argued that gay men and lesbians did read those papers, and they became very important to the gay community, because they were among the few places in which homosexuality was even mentioned. Many Canadian gays and lesbians subscribed to the newsletters of American homophile organizations, such as *The Ladder*, *One* and *The Mattachine Review*. However, many people were afraid to put their names on mailing lists, as these publications were often seized at the border by Canadian customs officials, or else the United States Post Office would refuse to deliver them (Katz 30). Under pressure from Egan, the Toronto tabloid *Justice Weekly* occasionally printed articles from these American homophile journals, as well as articles and letters written by Egan himself. However, Egan points out that the reason the editors of *Justice Weekly* agreed to publish the letters and articles was because they were considered bizarre and scandalous, and not because they were taken seriously by the publishers of the newspaper (120).

As in the larger newspapers, almost all of the articles from the tabloids deal with male homosexuality rather than lesbianism, but there was one article specifically about lesbians, published in *Flash* in 1951. The headline read, "'Women Shun Us!--Men Scoff At Us!' Toronto Lesbian Tells All! Can't Help Being 'Different' Is Plea of 'Third Sexer!'." The article is supposedly written by a lesbian, under the pseudonym "Sapho" [sic]. The author points out that lesbianism "is old as time

itself," and argues that lesbians "do nobody any harm" and should not be ostracized. She writes that, "[b]efore I was twenty I had read and digested Freud, Jung, Havelock Ellis and Kraft-Ebing." This background in psychoanalysis and sexology is apparent in her description of lesbianism, which reads:

...Lesbians fall into three groups: those who are homosexual because of a glandular deficiency; those who, while normal at birth, become homosexual as a result of a psychic shock, and those who, in maturity, turn voluntarily to Lesbianism as a release from the vulgarity and bestiality of men...This latter group is largely made up of prostitutes...[b]ut these girls are not true Lesbians. (Egan 24)

Although this description is rather lurid and sensational, it presents essentially the same analysis of lesbianism published in the more reputable newspapers and magazines during this time period. There is a lengthy description of lesbian prostitutes in the article, and readers are told about brothels that cater to female clients:

Because of [prostitutes'] wide experience with so-called "normal" sex, these girls frequently reach a supremely delicate and fulfilling Lesbian technique which it would take a natural Lesbian years to acquire. They know every erotic zone of the female body, instinctively understand what motions and caresses will bring it to the zenith of passion, and are artists in working themselves and their partner up to the true, complete Lesbian orgasm. (Egan 24)

CONCLUSION

Although there were only a handful of articles which directly addressed lesbianism published in mainstream media in the 1950s, these articles, along with articles on gay men were important in shaping the discourse of homosexuality in Canadian and American cultures. Because the articles on homosexuality published in the 1950s were among the first to reach the mainstream press, they were

instrumental in shaping the way the public viewed the subject. As well, these articles were very important to gay men and lesbians, as they were among the only sources of information on homosexuality, and for many isolated gays and lesbians, possibly their only contact whatsoever with the gay community. The 1950s and early 1960s was the formative period for homophile organizing in Canada, and many of these early activists were influenced a great deal by these media images. For example, it was the biased and unfair representation of gay men in Toronto's newspapers that first incited Jim Egan to write letters of complaint, and begin his years of struggle for lesbian and gay rights. After decades of invisibility, lesbians and lesbianism have become a popular media topic in the 1990s. In 1993, which was the peak of the "lesbian chic" trend, the American television show *Roseanne* introduced a regularly appearing lesbian character into its plot, and almost every major North American newspaper and magazine ran feature articles, in which lesbianism was presented as "fun," "fashionable," and "trendy." Although the "lesbian chic" articles published in the 1990s are less overtly homophobic than articles from the 1950s and 1960s, they are in many ways informed by the same ideologies. The articles are still aimed at a primarily heterosexual audience. Lesbians who are white, thin, able-bodied and stereotypically attractive are presented as fashionable and "chic," while lesbians who are less attractive, too butch, or too political are either excluded or denigrated. This is remarkably similar to the trend in the 1950s, in which "feminine" lesbians were given much more favourable coverage than lesbians who were "mannish" or "militant." Articles from the 1990s also reveal a preoccupation with the supposed causes of lesbianism, indicating that the essentially heterosexist assumption that heterosexuality is natural while homosexuality is "caused" has remained unchanged. Although there may be somewhat more tolerance for transgressing gender boundaries and sex roles in the 1990s than there was in the 1950s and 1960s, mainstream media still uphold a heterosexual hegemony, in which homosexuality, although tolerated to a certain extent, is still defined as a deviation from the norm.

By comparing media images of the 1990s with coverage from the 1950s and 1960s, we can see that although the language has changed, the essential message has not.

ENDNOTES

1. The author would like to thank Katherine Arnup for her advice and input into earlier drafts of this paper.
2. See for example, Albert Warson. "Degenerates Parade, Inspector Says: Blames Lack of Public Disgust for Growth of Homosexuality." *Globe and Mail*, 14 Nov 1963: 13.
3. For examples, see Warson. "Degenerates Parade, Inspector Says" and C.K. Cameron. "The Problem that is Never Mentioned," *Canadian Home Journal*. Nov 1951: 12, 103- 106.
4. It is important to note that the terms "butch" and "femme" were not commonly used in mainstream or psychological articles in this period. Terms such as "mannish," "masculine," "feminine," "active" and "passive" were more frequently used.
5. See Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*; and Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* for discussion of the changing roles of women in the post World War II period.

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