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**Sapphic Primitivism in Modern Fiction:  
Virginia Woolf's The Waves, Sylvia Townsend Warner's  
Summer Will Show, and Willa Cather's  
Sapphira and the Slave Girl**

by

Robin Hackett

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2000

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## Abstract

Sapphic Primitivism in Modern Fiction:  
 Virginia Woolf's The Waves, Sylvia Townsend Warner's  
Summer Will Show, and Willa Cather's  
Sapphira and the Slave Girl

by

Robin Hackett

Adviser: Professor Jane Marcus

This study examines figurations of blackness and degeneracy that are central to representations of lesbianism in Virginia Woolf's The Waves (1931), Sylvia Townsend Warner's Summer Will Show (1936), and Willa Cather's Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940). Toni Morrison argues that in white-authored American literature, figurations of blackness--of black people and dark expanses, of slaves and slavery--operate as shorthand expressions of what is both feared and benevolent, voluptuous and sinful. Following Morrison, I reveal the ways in which figurations of blackness function in lesbian literature in the aftermath of the trial involving Radclyffe Hall's Well of Loneliness, and in the context of widespread modernist primitivism in art, music and literature. Also as context, I discuss late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexology. Sexologists make diverse arguments, but each seeks to take the measure of European middle-class white homosexuality by writing comparative ethnography.

Woolf, Warner, and Cather reflect this standard trope of reference to homosexuality. Woolf excises nearly all obvious references to Rhoda's lesbianism from early drafts of The Waves. But a suggestion of lesbianism remains in Woolf's use of figurations of blackness: when other characters talk about sex or sensuality, Rhoda talks about India, warriors with assegais, tigers, swallows dipping their wings in dark pools, cobras, or Turks. Warner's Summer Will Show is more overtly homoerotic and anti-imperialist than The Waves is. But despite Warner's political convictions and her criticism of writers who romanticize the working class, racialized and working-class characters have the power to prompt the protagonist's erotic and political transformations specifically

because of their class or race. In Sapphira, Cather also follows the model established by sexologists' use of figurations of blackness. In order to explore the possibility of female-centered erotics for white women, Cather creates an alliance between Sapphira, a white slave-owner, and Jezebel, an enslaved African characterized as a mythological savage.

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my ideas about Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Townsend Warner as well as lesbian modernism. Finally, I would like to thank Patti Palen, my partner and ideal reader, for her many editorial suggestions and her insistence that I write something she wanted to read. -

## Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
One: Sapphic Primitivism, an Introduction	1
Two: The Homosexual Primitivism of Modernism	19
Three: Empire, Social Rot, and Sexual Fantasy in <u>The Waves</u>	39
Four: Race, Class and Sex in the Work of Sylvia Townsend Warner	66
Five: <u>Summer Will Show</u> : Class, Sex and Race Primitivism	88
Six: Jezebel and Sapphira: Willa Cather's Monstrous Sapphists	120
Conclusion	153
List of Works Cited	156

## One: Sapphic Primitivism, an Introduction

Virginia Woolf's The Waves (1931), Sylvia Townsend Warner's Summer Will Show (1936), and Willa Cather's Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) are an unlikely trio in many ways. They differ in form and content, ranging from high-modernist "play-poem," to 1930s historical realism, to nostalgic Southern pastoral.<sup>1</sup> Their reputations in mainstream literary history vary tremendously: The Waves is celebrated for its formal complexity, while Summer Will Show is only now being revived, and Sapphira has been generally scorned.<sup>2</sup> In the canon of lesbian modernism, such as it is, The Waves rarely appears although some of Woolf's other works head the list; alternately, among scholars of lesbian modernism, Sapphira and Summer Will Show are developing nearly cult status.

Despite these differences, however, important similarities draw all three novels together. Erotics between women are central to each; simultaneously, each relies on modernist primitivism, the twentieth-century Euro-American self-representational mode in which images of people and cultures imagined to be outside time and history are used as symbols of violence, energy, and sensuality. This combination of lesbian erotics and modernist primitivism defines a literary phenomenon I am calling Sapphic primitivism, a literary mode in which figurations of blackness and working-class culture appear as

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<sup>1</sup> During the early stages of its development, Woolf described The Waves as a "play-poem" referring to what she imagined would be a new form: a mix of novel and play, poetry and prose (Diary 3: 128, 236).

<sup>2</sup> Patrick McGee's "The Politics of Modernist Form" is an example of criticism in which The Waves is celebrated for its form. Recent writing on Summer Will Show includes Terry Castle's The Apparitional Lesbian (1993), Arnold Rattenbury's "Literature, Lying and Sober Truth" (1996), Janet Montefiore's "Listening to Minna" (1996), Maroula Joannou's "Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1930s" (1998), Thomas Foster's "Dream Made Flesh," (1995) and Gay Wachman's "Lady into Fox, Fox into Lady" (1998)" and "Crosswriting the Empire: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Lesbian Modernism" (1999). Hermione Lee is characteristically negative in her assessment of Sapphira, though Lee is generally a very sympathetic reader (and biographer) of Cather. She writes that "[t]he novel's weakness is that it . . . collapses its presentation of the historical dilemma into a simplifying nostalgia" (367). As Toni Morrison sums it up, "[r]eferences to Sapphira in much Cather scholarship are apologetic, dismissive, even cutting in their brief documentation of its flaws" (18).

constitutive elements of white-authored fictional representations of lesbian erotics.<sup>3</sup> This interdependence of figures of sexuality and race is similar to that discussed by Edward Said, Marianna Torgovnick and Anne McClintock, among other cultural critics. But the Sapphic primitivism I discuss here has a specificity with regard to lesbianism and sexological sciences of homosexuality that has yet to be acknowledged. Reading The Waves, Summer Will Show, and Sapphira and the Slave Girl together enables me to describe how Sapphic primitivism shapes these three diverse works: in turn, using Sapphic primitivism as a descriptive category enables new analyses of a wide variety of twentieth-century literature.

My analysis of Sapphic primitivism relies on Toni Morrison's theory of American Africanism. In Playing in the Dark, Morrison argues that in white-authored American literature, ubiquitous figurations of blackness--of black people and dark expanses, of slaves and slavery--operate as shorthand expressions of a "not-free," "not-me," of what is both feared and benevolent, voluptuous and sinful (38). Major themes of American literature, such as individuality, ruggedness, newness and difference, autonomy, and absolute power, are made possible by the awareness and use of this presence--a literary phenomenon Morrison calls American Africanism.<sup>4</sup>

Following Morrison, I demonstrate that in The Waves, Woolf relies on figurations of blackness and colonial space as place-holders for lesbianism. Early drafts of the novel

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<sup>3</sup> I describe these novels as "Sapphic" to emphasize to readers on every side of the debate about whether or not it is defensible to call Virginia Woolf, for instance, a lesbian, that erotic attachments between women are central to her fiction.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison's book has dramatically changed the way I read figurations of blackness in white-authored works of Sapphic Modernism. Before I read Playing in the Dark, for instance, I barely noticed a "coloured man" who appears driving a carriage and exists for only half a sentence in Gertrude Stein's "The Good Anna." In the context of Morrison's argument, however, the man becomes central to my reading of the story, as does the fact that Mrs. Lehntman's loss of status, and increasing submission to the good Anna, is described as "blackening." Attention to figurations of blackness in the story exposes "The Good Anna" as a parody of hierarchies, a hyperbolization of the intricate system of control-over-others into which the immigrant, Anna, fits herself in the process of becoming American.

show that the character Rhoda came into being in Woolf's imagination as a lesbian. In the final version of the novel, Woolf suppresses lesbian references, but when other characters talk about sex, Rhoda talks about Africa, India, Turks, dark pools, distance, or tigers. In Summer Will Show, Warner uses racialized Jewishness, working-class sexuality, and mixed-race and Caribbean origins as tropes that explain her central character's transformation from "frigid" and arrogant landowner to sexually-awakened lesbian communist. In Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Cather presents Sapphira's homoerotic obsession with the bodies of two women she owns as a mirror image of cannibalism and mythological African savagery.

I examine the Sapphic primitivism of these three novels in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific discourses (sexology, anthropology, psychology) that rely on diverse figurations of blackness as tropes. If, as Foucault argues, the concept of the "homosexual" is discursively constructed through these sciences, the specific language through which it is constructed is that of race and class. Julie Abraham argues that "[l]iterary conventions are one method through which 'the age' determines where we look and what we see as 'homosexual content'" (xiv). I argue that literary and scientific conventions of turning to comparative ethnography in sexological, anthropological and psychological writing about homosexuality suggested to Woolf, Warner, Cather, as well as to many others, a way to see and represent homosexual content in their fiction.<sup>5</sup>

I also emphasize the importance of the censorious legal atmosphere of the 1930s: each novel I discuss was written in the aftermath of the 1929 obscenity trial involving

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<sup>5</sup> Turn of the century discourse about homosexuality is usually not about lesbians, but this does not exclude lesbian writers from making use of discourse primarily about men for their own purposes in efforts to represent or explore lesbianism narratively. Julie Abraham points out that "[g]ay men appear in 'lesbian novels' throughout the pre-Stonewall decades of the twentieth century," often as guides to the gay underworld. That men are representative guides in lesbian novels, she argues, "reflects the extent to which gay men rather than lesbians served culturally as representative of homosexuality" (33). For the same reason that lesbian writers write about male homosexuality, as Abraham claims, I believe they use tropes from scientific discourse written primarily about male homosexuality in their explorations and representations of lesbianism.

Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness. The 1930s and 1940s are a "second phase in the history of the lesbian novel . . . dominated by responses to The Well" (Abraham 5). During this period, novelists wrote with the knowledge that "identifiably lesbian texts might be banned" and that "female writers of lesbian novels faced being publicly identified by their texts" (26). But since only formulaic realist lesbian novels might be identified as lesbian, "this left a great deal of space for the development of a wide range of other lesbian writings" as, for example, Virginia Woolf's fantasy, Orlando (27), which was not censored. One of the spaces opened up by the comparative literary mode of sexology, anthropology and psychology, I argue, is Sapphic primitivism.

The three novels I discuss are also written in the contexts of intense debates about imperialism and the rise of fascism in Europe. Woolf and Warner were writing critically about European imperialism and fascism in the 1930s and were fully engaged with the contemporary and often highly sexualized rhetoric of race characteristic of imperialist discourse. Cather does not write anti-imperialist fiction, but nevertheless Sapphira reflects Cather's engagement with the rhetoric of American empire-building as well as abolitionist and anti-abolitionist discussions of race.

In combination, Morrison's theory of American Africanism and histories of the constructions of race and sexuality in sexology, anthropology, and psychology, enable me to discuss the imbricated presences of Sapphism and primitivism in works by Woolf, Warner, and Cather. As Morrison's concept "American Africanism" enables critics to focus on the ways white authors in the United States have used an Africanist presence to make the themes of individuality, freedom, and autonomy visible, a discussion of the primitivism in discourse about homosexuality enables readers to perceive the uses middle-class white lesbian writers have made--both intentionally and unwittingly--of the (homo)sexual subtext of stereotyped dark and working-class bodies. Such a discussion can describe how these bodies appear as tropes of lesbian representation in fiction.

I participate, here, in a larger discussion of modernist primitivism in the arts. At

least since 1984 when William Rubin published his catalog of the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibit "'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," cultural critics have been discussing primitivism as a problematic set of assumptions underlying modernist art and literature. Artists and writers have long and variously used the term "primitive."<sup>6</sup> Rubin's catalog reflects the widespread assumption that African art is a raw material, the importance of which is its power to inspire Euro-American artistic genius. In response to Rubin and to this assumption, critics including Houston Baker, Michael North, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Paul Gilroy, and Sieglinde Lemke have analyzed the ways in which African, African American and Euro-American arts and cultures are "mutually constituted."<sup>7</sup> And writers including Chinua Achebe, Anne McClintock, Edward Said, Marianna Torgovnick and David Theo Goldberg have analyzed systems of thought underlying Euro-American discussions about African art, about the creators and subjects of that art, and about the continuously shifting categories of people who are the subjects of primitivizing discourses.<sup>8</sup>

Primitivism is not unique to the twentieth century: Pablo Picasso's masks, Igor Stravinsky's drums, and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness are indebted to travel writings by early-modern explorers who described what they saw as exotic or savage. T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland and Paul Gauguin's Tahitians descend from discourses on the noble savage such as Aphra Behn's Oroonoko and Jean Jacques Rousseau's Discours sur l'origine de

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<sup>6</sup> "Primitive" has been used to describe early Euro-American art, pre-Renaissance European art, all ancient art including Greek, Roman and Chinese, for instance, early English poetry celebrated in the eighteenth century by those resisting neo-classicism, and, most recently Native American, African and Oceanic arts. See Torgovnick (18-20) for a history of the term's usage.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Louis Gates uses this phrase on the dust jacket of Lemke's Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism. See also Baker's Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, North's The Dialect of Modernism and "Modernism's African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration," Fishkin's Was Huck Black?, and Gilroy's The Black Atlantic.

<sup>8</sup> See Achebe's "A Vision of Africa," McClintock's Imperial Leather, Said's Orientalism, Torgovnick's Gone Primitive, and Goldberg's Racist Culture.

l'inegalite, which idealize an imagined superior naturalness of so-called primitive man and enable a critique of his civilized but corrupt counterpart.<sup>9</sup> But if models for primitivism are evident in much early Western art and literature,<sup>10</sup> primitivism became a widespread obsession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In dance, literature, painting, and music as well as anthropology, psychology, and sexology, Western Europeans repeatedly sought to define their own humanity in opposition to a monolithic usually dark-skinned Other who was imagined to be supremely savage, barbaric, natural, unnatural, exotic or some contradictory combination of these. Picasso and others embraced the primitive of their imaginations--including constructions of people, arts, cultures, and landscapes--for that primitive's violence, energy and natural sensuality. Barbarism and savagery were to provide antidotes to corrupting, over-civilized, effete modern Euro-American societies, as well as, paradoxically, to explain the violence unleashed in world wars.

The importance of primitivism to modernism, and the implications of that primitivism, are well-documented. The widespread European preoccupation with the so-called primitive begins in the 1890s when British imperialists looted bronze and ivory artwork from Benin, and when, as a result, European scholars and museum curators began to try to classify this and other art from West Africa.<sup>11</sup> These efforts to classify, along with a gradually increasing appreciation, as a result of such efforts, for the Benin art, provided "a whole new aesthetic category for European connoisseurs" and "a new idiom for Western

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the role of travel writings in the construction of the primitive see Christopher Steiner's "Travel Engravings and the Construction of the Primitive." For a discussion of the overlap between the noble savage of the eighteenth century and modernist primitivism see Vincent Crapanzano's "The Moment of Prestidigitation."

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Martin argues that the idea of the primitive "predate[s] the description of the acorn-eating primeval man in Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy (535 A.C.E.)" (321).

<sup>11</sup> See Barkan and Bush's introduction to Prehistories of the Future. Also see Annie Coombes' Reinventing Africa for a discussion of British museum culture's response to imperialist encounters with the art of West Africa and the Benin Bronzes in particular.

art" (Barkan and Bush 1).

In Gone Primitive, Marianna Torgovnick describes the phenomenon of primitivism and critiques its contemporary manifestations. She argues that modern and post-modern primitivizing tropes, which are infinitely flexible and contradictory, form a discourse about the Euro-American sense of self. In this discourse, "primitive" fills the positions of both the Euro-American past and the Euro-American opposite. Torgovnick shows, through examination of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan stories, and works by Joseph Conrad, Sigmund Freud, D. H. Lawrence, Bronislaw Malinowski, James Frazer, and Roger Fry, the ways in which "for Euro-Americans the primitive as an inexact expressive whole--often with little correspondence to any specific or documented societies--has been an influential and powerful concept, capable of referring both to societies 'out there' and to subordinate groups within the West" (20).

Philosopher of race David Theo Goldberg criticizes Torgovnick for perpetuating us-them thinking by her use of "we" to mean Euro-Americans. Goldberg is principally interested in explaining the logic of contemporary racism, and in explaining how simply calling it illogical is part of the problem, by tracing the origins of that logic back to the Enlightenment. Primitivism, he shows, is part of the logic of racism--a belief among colonizers that those they colonize have neither history nor culture. This belief has been used to sanction violence, paternalism, and ghettoization as well as the erasure and appropriation of cultures.

Though their approaches are different, Torgovnick and Goldberg both insist on historical, geographical and political specificity in reference to people and places that have been used as examples of a monolithic primitive. Specificity, they both argue, is a useful corrective to some of the violent contemporary effects of primitivism. Paradoxically--a word that comes up constantly in any discussion of primitivism--both Torgovnick and Goldberg would agree that primitives don't exist; rather, primitivism "denotes an Occidental construction, a set of representations whose 'reality' is purely Western" (Barkan

and Bush 2).

I am also engaged with literary discussions of Sapphic modernism as a genre of its own. Susan Gubar, Shari Benstock, Jane Marcus, Karla Jay, Cassandra Laity, Ruth Vanita, Erin Carlston and Yopie Prins have done the work of delineating Sapphic modernism as a genre.<sup>12</sup> Susan Gubar uses the term "Sapphistries" to denote twentieth-century writers' rediscovery/reinvention of Sappho as literary foremother and as representative of all the lost women of genius in literary history, especially all the lesbian artists whose work has been destroyed, sanitized, or heterosexualized (46). Shari Benstock would include as Sapphic modernists those women writers who "fused 'asexual poetics' and 'sexual politics' in the continuation of a female poetic tradition that extended back to Sappho and forward to H.D.'s rewriting of the classical tradition" (452). Benstock focuses particularly on the women who created a literary circle within the Paris of the expatriate--a Paris which was often seen by others as a female muse seductive to men. Most recently, Yopie Prins argues that Sapphic modernists such as H.D., as well as contemporary feminist critics who use Sappho to evoke lost female literary traditions, are responding to Victorian renderings of Sappho as essentially fragmentary and lost. Importantly, Erin Carlston suggests that in characterizations of writers and their work, Sapphism should be "taken to express itself not as an organized identity or as a mise-en-texte of biography, but as a hypersensitivity to sexuality in, and as, the aesthetic and the political" (6).

Central to the discussion of Sapphic modernism is the fascism of many of the lesbian writers of the 1910s and 20s. Janet Flanner's support of Petain during WWII, and her and Gertrude Stein's admiration of strong leaders, are problems to be dealt with

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<sup>12</sup> See Susan Gubar's "Sapphistries," Shari Benstock's Women of the Left Bank, Jane Marcus's "Sapphistries: Narration as Lesbian Seduction in A Room of One's Own," Karla Jay's "The Outsider among the Expatriates: Djuna Barnes' Satire on the Ladies of the Almanack," Cassandra Laity's "H.D. and A.C. Swinburne: Decadence and Sapphic Modernism," Ruth Vanita's Sappho and the Virgin Mary, Erin Carlston's Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity and Yopie Prins' Victorian Sappho.

seriously. Generally, the politics of the white Sapphic modernists were as reactionary as those of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound who also primitivized people of African descent and the working class.<sup>13</sup> It is also important to note the emphasis on glamour in the upper-class lives of Natalie Barney, Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, and Janet Flanner. Only women of relatively high class status and financial stability had the privilege and leisure to write lesbian desire even inexplicitly.

Sapphic modernism is not a lesser subset of literary modernism. Rather, it is central to the birth of modernism as a movement, and hence needs to be central to our understanding of modernism. This becomes clear by bringing together two claims made by Michael North in "Modernism's African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration." North argues that "Stein and Picasso take the first steps into Cubism and literary modernism by performing uncannily similar transformations on the figure of Gertrude Stein herself" (271). Picasso finishes a portrait of Stein by covering a realistic rendering of her face with a mask modeled after ancient Iberian reliefs he had seen at the Louvre. Similarly, Stein, perhaps even motivating Picasso's use of the mask, re-writes an autobiographical story, Q.E.D., into a new story, "Melanctha," by giving it an African-American mask. For Picasso and for Stein, North says, "the step away from conventional verisimilitude into abstraction is accomplished by a figurative change of race" (272).

With this Picasso-Stein collaboration, North argues, modernism coheres as a movement. By pushing to extremes colonialist contradictions about Africans and African art--contradictory beliefs that the people and the artifacts are the most naked of representations and at the same time the most opaque and obviously artificial--modernists explored contradictions about gender, nationality and genre. This exploration was enabled by the use of the African mask, in particular, because of the mask's susceptibility to contradictory interpretations, and because those contradictions exposed the similarity of

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion, see Erin Carlston's Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity.

visual arts to writing--both are signs.

But North also describes another important set of circumstances surrounding the use of masks over Stein's face. Picasso's use of the mask has to do with his feelings about what North calls Stein's "unconventional sexuality." North writes, "[t]he mask she wears is a sign of . . . sexual ambiguity, the impersonal immobility of it associated in Picasso's work of the time with a physical bulk and power not at all conventionally feminine" (280). Also significantly, Picasso uses the same mask to express sexual ambiguity in a series of studies leading up to the final version of Les Femmes d'Alger. In one study, a male figure appears; in the following study, the same Iberian mask with which Picasso had covered Stein's face covers the male figure's face, the mask accompanying a change of gender (North 280).

Stein's use of masking in "Melanctha" is also about gender, sexuality, and race combined. In the original Q.E.D., Stein records her unhappy lesbian love affair with fellow Johns Hopkins student May Bookstaver (Katz iii). "Melanctha" includes lines of dialogue from Q.E.D., but Stein peoples the story with black characters. In addition, she flips conventions of masculinity and femininity by making it a man--Dr. Jeff--who worries at home, and a woman who wanders. North argues that Stein's use of black masks presents race as a role; it is "an open invite to consider it as culturally constituted--and perhaps to consider gender as a role as well" (282). Ambiguity created by Stein's racial masquerade, as well as by her insertion of ambiguity and doubt into words of distinctness such as "certainly," "makes gender and, finally, the body itself seem a mask" (283). Most importantly, North says, as with Picasso's use of the mask, Stein's masking "is not a cover for an unconventional sexuality but a revelation of it, even a means of achieving it" (283).

My project begins by putting two parts of North's analysis of Picasso and Stein's use of African and African American masks together. North says that this moment of masking is "one of the most important episodes in the birth of [modernism]" (271). And,

he says, for Picasso and Stein, this masking is about revealing "unconventional sexuality." It follows, then, that exposing unconventional sexuality by the use of African and African American masks is the "episode" that signals the birth of modernism. More specifically, as Stein's "unconventional sexuality" is lesbian sexuality, North's essay suggests without saying it directly that this important episode is about exposing lesbian sexuality with the use of African and African American masks. In the pages that follow, I explore this aspect of modernism by looking at the ways in which Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Willa Cather have done exactly that: exposed lesbianism, to varying degrees, by manipulating figurations of blackness--by metaphorically giving lesbianism African and African American masks. Paradoxically, this often involves rendering black people visible in no way except as metaphor or fetish.

This analysis has the potential to reconfigure the way we look at modernism. In her introduction to The Gender of Modernism, Bonnie Kime Scott asserts that a "crisis in gender identification . . . underlies much of modernist literature" (2) and that "modernism was inflected, in ways we can only now begin to appreciate, by gender" (3). Following from Scott's work, I suggest that lesbianism in particular, in addition to gender and sexuality in general, are central to the fears and desires behind modernists' self-imagining. Where emphasis has been placed on the centrality of primitivism to white-authored modernism, we now have to ask: where, and with what result, is lesbianism also being revealed or repressed? In such re-readings of modernism, Sapphic modernists themselves cannot reasonably be thought of as Other modernists. Nor does Modernism as a descriptive category maintain even the precision left to it by work like Scott's.

My work also has potential to make a constructive intervention into the politics of contemporary women's studies, feminist criticism, and queer theory. I identify the authors whose work I discuss as white and middle-class not, as those identity markers are sometimes used, to indicate that I will try to talk about sexuality separate from race and class. Nor is it my aim merely to point out the racisms and class-biases of Woolf, Warner

and Cather.<sup>14</sup> Rather, I focus on categories of race, class and sexuality in the novels as intersecting, interdependent, discursive constructions. My aim is to cull from this interdependence a basis for a politics of empathy that can be employed by people involved in liberatory struggle.

In "American Kabuki" Patricia Williams points to the possibility of this kind of empathic thinking by outlining a failure of empathy in her discussion of responses to the trial of O.J. Simpson. She argues that many black women had difficulty seeing Nicole Brown Simpson as a casualty of racist, sexist culture because of her blond-beauty standard good looks. This was despite the fact that had Simpson left her husband and his money at the first sign of violence, she is unlikely to have had anything but welfare (if that) between herself and her children and homelessness.

Many white women had difficulty imagining that the sympathy generated by pictures of Nicole Brown Simpson's battered face, as well as the abuse she suffered, were the product of racist, sexist culture in which ravishing white fragility is idealized femininity. The sympathy generated by Simpson's face is in sharp contrast to the "de-aesthetizing masculinization of black women" iterated constantly in the media and in public policy debates about welfare (285). Williams writes:

If we have difficulty imagining the beautiful Nicole Brown Simpson as a putative welfare mother, then surely this is as much a problem of race as it is of feminism. By the same token, if we have difficulty imagining Emma Mae Martin<sup>15</sup> as the beaut[y] . . . to whom our hearts rush out in all her ravishing fragility, then we must understand this as a problem of sexism as much as it is of race. The failure to see one in the embodied distress of the other is a cultural blindness that afflicts every segment of our culture. (291)

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Gubar, for instance, examines racial crossings specifically to explore racism in Racechanges.

<sup>15</sup> Clarence Thomas's sister, vilified as a "welfare queen" (Williams 290).

Similarly, the Human Rights Campaign's 1998 endorsement of New York senator Al D'Amato despite his anti-abortion and anti-welfare voting record suggests that many of those organizing under the single-issue banner of gay rights cannot see their own plight in the embodied distress of people of color, women, and the poor. HRC's politics might procure the "rights" of heteronormative white and male supremacist culture for a few more people--might enable (some) gay and lesbian assimilation into white and male supremacy. But such politics do nothing to disrupt the racist, sexist, and classist violences perpetrated to maintain those supremacies.

The failures described by Williams, and the failures of HRC, however, point to an alternative politics of empathy in which individuals can see their own plight in the particular embodied distresses of others. Such a politics relies not on people liking one another, but rather on an understanding of the ways in which categories of race, sex, class and sexuality are mutually constructed. The following discussion contributes detail about this mutuality that can be used in building an argument for politics based on empathy in organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign. Where people of color, poor and working class people, and some kinds of queers have, at best, been "invited" to bring their concerns to the table as sideshows, a politics of empathy for HRC would involve racism, classism, and sexism as central, constitutive concerns of the organization.

### **Another Introduction**

This dissertation did not really begin with my reading of Morrison or North or Williams, however. Rather, a personal, domestic experience of one way in which race-specific constructions of sexuality operate in contemporary United States culture influenced my reading of modernist primitivism, especially in texts by lesbians. Visiting my family in the San Francisco Bay area in the early 1990s, I became fully conscious of a feeling I had been vaguely aware of since I came out as a lesbian: there is a sexiness about being in the grocery store, a restaurant, or a few other public places with my brother that is

paradoxically absent when I am in the grocery store with my woman lover--the specific variety of sexiness that comes from being perceived as sexual. When people see my brother and me together, particularly in a situation in which they can assume some kind of shared domesticity, they seem to see sexuality, which is sometimes reflected in their expressions as curiosity or titillation, and other times by a lack of curiosity stemming from the assumption that if we are buying groceries together we must be a couple. My lover and I, on the other hand, rarely get this kind of sexually-alert attention outside of a lesbian context.

This desexualizing of my lover and me is partly because lesbianism often goes unnoticed when it is present, or, if it is acknowledged, is presumed not to be sexual. As Terry Castle writes, "[w]hen it comes to lesbians . . . many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them" (2). People are more likely, in other words, to assume sexual intimacy between a man and a woman in a grocery store than to assume sexual intimacy between two women in the same situation.<sup>16</sup>

But the over-sexualizing of my brother and me is also because I am white-skinned, as is my lover, and my brother is brown-skinned. As scholars, including those studying primitivism in art and literature, have pointed out, dark-skinned bodies are often stereotyped and represented as hypersexual themselves, and are used to sexualize scenes in which they appear. Charles Stember argues that "in the early history of the American colonies" assertions of black hypersexuality were "concretized in myth into specific anatomical and physiological details--his penis was larger, his sexual capacity greater, his desire harder to satisfy" (57). Angela Davis provides a corrective to Stember's androcentric view by pointing out that there is an "inseparable companion" to the male

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<sup>16</sup> The work of many scholars, in addition to Terry Castle's The Apparitional Lesbian, examines the invisibility of lesbians and lesbian sexuality. See, for instance, Luce Irigaray's Speculum of the Other Woman, Bonnie Zimmerman's "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," Blanche Wiesen Cook's "Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition," Teresa de Lauretis' The Practice of Love, and Lynda Hart's Fatal Women.

rapist image: "the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous" (182).<sup>17</sup> In Disfigured Images, Patricia Morton charts the ways in which, in American historiography, African American women are constructed as the most nurturing, the most sensual and/or the most castrating of all women.

As a corollary to this hypersexualization of dark-skinned bodies, bodies which appear white, middle-class, and female are only a little more likely to evoke female heterosexuality than they are to evoke lesbianism.<sup>18</sup> This is because the combined identity white, middle-class, and woman has been delimited by the qualities purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. As Hazel Carby puts it, according to the nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood, these qualities are attributable only to white women, and, together with whiteness, are "the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women" (23).

However, if it is true that images of middle-class white women are not likely to evoke female hetero- or lesbian sexuality, the image of black and white together, in this same interrelated set of icons, is likely to represent sexuality--specifically illicit and/or dangerous female sexuality including lesbianism. Jewelle Gomez provides a contemporary U.S. example of the ways in which a black woman and a white woman together elicit a presumption of lesbianism where two women of color, like two white women, do not. Even despite the history of hypersexualization of black people, she writes:

almost without exception it has been when I've been with white women that I've been harassed, in public, as a lesbian. It seems that two women of color walking down a city street together are invisible or inconsequential, but a Black woman walking with a white woman sets off alarms in the

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Morton makes this comparison between Davis and Stember in Disfigured Images.

<sup>18</sup> Obviously I am not talking about women as heterosexual sex objects, which is common, but rather about desirous female heterosexuality.

minds of bigots. (160)

Sander Gilman explains this sexualizing iconography of dark-skinned and white-skinned bodies together by using examples from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European paintings including Edouard Manet's Olympia and Franz von Bayros' The Servant. In Olympia, Gilman writes, "the central white female figure is associated with a black female in such a way as to imply a similarity between the sexuality of the two" (81). In The Servant, a nearly naked black girl touches the back of an also naked, but much less revealed, white woman.<sup>19</sup> The detail of the black girl's genitalia, as well as her open-mouthed smile and elaborate adornments, make up what Gilman calls the "hypersexuality of the black child," which, he also says, "signals the hidden sexuality of the white woman" (83).

Gilman also explains that the sexuality that adheres to the bodies of the white women in the paintings is pathological and specifically lesbian sexuality. In representational systems of the Other in general, he says, overt connections link sexuality and race with pathology as well:

sexual anatomy is so important a part of self-image that "sexually different" is tantamount to pathological--the Other is "impaired," "sick," "diseased." Similarly, physiognomy or skin color that is perceived as different is immediately associated with "pathology" and "sexuality." (25)

Specifically lesbian sexuality is evoked in the paintings through a series of analogies in which "the black female comes to serve as an icon for black sexuality in general" (83) and in which, through associations with pathology and prostitution, "the concupiscence of the black is . . . associated with the sexuality of the lesbian" (89).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gilman calls the black figure "girl" and "child," but her age is ambiguous which might be part of the way in which hypersexuality is constructed.

<sup>20</sup> I would add to Gilman's discussion of how the sexuality marked is specifically lesbian by pointing out that the black girl in The Servant is leaning toward the white woman and touching her back, while the white woman is leaning away from the black girl, and poised to receive touch. To the degree that action upon passive women is what defines (always

Historians of colonialism and of the presence of black people in England also discuss the often specifically sexual meaning of black and white together. About the association between taboo sexuality and the image of black and white together in the 1600s.- for instance, Peter Fryer writes that the

status of London's black population in the second half of the seventeenth century is best conveyed in a little book published in 1675, called "the Character of a Town Misse." "Town miss" was a euphemism for the fashionable high-class whore of the period, who the book says "hath always two necessary Implements about her, a Blackamoor, and a little Dog; for without these, she would be neither Fair nor Sweet." (Fryer 31-2)

Racist science developed through the 1700s and 1800s and the eugenics movement of the early 1900s combined ideas about black hypersexuality with assumptions of white working-class female hypersexuality. Anne McClintock writes that "[b]y the nineteenth century, popular lore had firmly established Africa as the quintessential zone of sexual aberration and anomaly" (22).<sup>21</sup> And in their pro-slavery arguments, West Indian Planters characterized sexual relations between black men and the "lower orders" of white women as both common and "unnatural" (Fryer 160-64). Accounts of riots in England in the 1920s "manipulated fears of miscegenation by conflating dark skin with moral corruption" (394 Hovey).

None of these histories involve direct assertions that white and black together is the same as lesbianism, but assertions of unnaturalness, taint, and moral and racial corruption characterize discussions of homosexuality as consistently as they characterize discussions of blackness. My experiences with my brother are one contemporary U.S. manifestation of

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already masculine) desire, the black girl, by virtue of being an actor relative to a passive female, is a masculinized woman, which is evocative of lesbianism.

<sup>21</sup> See Roger Sanjek's Race: Peter Fryer's *Staying Power*, especially chapter seven; Anne McClintock's Imperial Leather, especially chapter one, and Edward Said's Orientalism.

this long history of racist/sexist logic. The iconography of my lover and me--two white women together--is seldom sexualized. Our lesbianism is commonly invisible; nor do we function as representations of female heterosexual desire. Alternately, my brother and I, as a pair of bodies, seem to function (certainly not always, but often enough for me to notice this as a pattern) as an analog of the kind of sexuality that is present, if unrecognized, between my lover and me.

While I do not suggest that my observations in grocery stores prove anything, fully describe my own experience, or even begin to represent my brother's, I emphasize these observations because they inform my reading of the interplay between race and sexuality in white-authored works of Sapphic modernism. While there is no way to prove that anything like what I describe was going in the mind of Gertrude Stein when she rewrote her story in blackface, it is worth speculating, at least, about the significance of the masking of Stein in the contexts of lesbian invisibility in contrast with the hypersexualization of African Americans. In other works of Sapphic modernism, as well, I see the presence of primitivized dark bodies--representations of blackness and colony that conform to the stereotypes that Gilman, Fryer and McClintock delineate--as a means by which white middle-class female bodies are made to be textual representations of lesbianism.

## **Two: The Homosexual Primitivism of Modernism**

As in modernist art and criticism, primitivism abounds in the social-science discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Literature about human sexual behavior both reflected and helped to construct symbolic linkages between lesbianism and male homosexuality, blackness, disease, criminality, working-class status, degeneracy, taint, pollution and prostitution. Reading The Waves, Summer Will Show, and Sapphira and the Slave Girl through these social-science discourses illuminates the ways in which Woolf, Warner and Cather use dark or working-class bodies in their representations of lesbianism.

Marianna Torgovnick argues that in their respective fields Sigmund Freud, James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Havelock Ellis shared similar goals: to define universal truths about human nature by using what they thought of as primitive societies as testing grounds, as keys to those universal truths (7). These goals often have particularly to do with establishing universal truths as well as moral guidelines about human sexuality. This use of the primitive as a trope upon which to build a sexual comparison reinforced the widespread perception that whatever and whoever filled out the category "primitive" existed, as Torgovnick says, in a highly sexualized field (3). And, in a circular way, the always already-sexualized character of the imaginary primitive encouraged social scientists to rely on comparisons between Europeans and a monolithic primitive in discourses of sexuality. Hence, psychology, anthropology and sexology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are full of primitivisms that combine sexual didacticism and sexual pleasure.

This didactic and erotic primitivist science is used abundantly by researchers who discuss homosexuality in particular. Whether they write to condemn homosexuality as degenerate and dangerous to the Empire (Malinowski) or to soften legal and social censure of the congenitally inverted (Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, Freud), or to celebrate morally elevated homogenic love (Symonds, Carpenter), or some combination of these, researchers of

homosexuality all sought to establish the measure of European middle-class white homosexuality by means of writing comparative ethnography. Lynda Hart writes that "a composite of Ellis's 'typical' invert . . . might well appear as a working-class woman of color who was either a criminal or a lunatic" (4). This is a little bit misleading, as the vast majority of sexological writing on homosexuality consists of case studies about middle- and upper-class white men. If any composite were drawn from Ellis's case studies, it would be of an upper-middle-class white Englishman with a family history of neuroses who had been exposed to homoerotic behavior in early life.

But Hart's claim is somewhat justified and very revealing: sexologists including Ellis repeatedly made their arguments about middle-class white homosexuality by making reference to people of color and to places outside of Western Europe, and to what Richard Burton defined in 1886 as the "Sotadic Zone," an area characterized, Burton claimed, by homosexuality. It includes "Meridional France, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and Greece, with the coast regions of Africa from Morocco to Egypt" also "Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Chaldea, Afghanistan, Sind the Punjab and Kashmir" as well as "China, Japan . . . Turkistan" and "the South Sea Islands and the New World where, at the time of its discovery, Sotadic love was . . . an established racial institution" (Cory 208). Each sexologist paints specifics about white middle-class European homosexuality against a backdrop of remarks about generalized uncivilized peoples, lower races, lower classes, savages, and primitives as well as reference to places frequently outside of Western Europe.

Additionally, many sexologists suggested that social approval of homosexuality would prove fertile soil for its development in individuals with a predisposition but who might not become homosexuals in a socially disapproving context. Examples of approving cultures are invariably those of working-class people, criminals, prostitutes, or specific sites outside of contemporary Western Europe. Such examples make the indirect argument that people of color, the working classes, and non-Western cultures can produce

homosexuality where it might not be otherwise.

It bears emphasizing that sexologists made diverse arguments about homosexuality and that some changed their minds over time.<sup>1</sup> While some understand homosexuality to be characteristic of one "race" or another, others insist that homosexuality is a genetic trait distributed across "race" and nation. Still others believe homosexuality to be an evolutionary throwback to a sexually undifferentiated phase of human development; hence it is part of the evolutionary past of all people, and evidence, in the present, of atavism or evolutionary primitivism such as is common, they argue, among criminals, prostitutes, and the working class, as well as people of the Sotadic Zone.<sup>2</sup> The following examples represent some of this variety in sexological writings; more significantly, the examples below show that despite major differences among sexologists and changes in thinking over time, "cultural and historical fascinations, anxieties and desires . . . produced race and sexuality as inextricable" and that sexology is "thoroughly imbricated in the discourse of race" (Somerville 203).

Bronislaw Malinowski's The Sexual Lives of Savages (1929) is a prime example of primitivizing anthropology. His discussion of the sexual lives of Trobrianders is a text of both self-representation and moral guidance for Englishmen built on comparative ethnography. His stated focus is on the Trobriand Islanders, but the unstated central goal of his work is to define normalcy and perversion for Europeans. The book describes Trobriand sexuality as pure human sexuality untainted by civilization (though missionaries threaten), outside time (except for a bemoaned future of European intrusion), and characterized by egalitarian relations between the sexes. Trobrianders are at once supremely and constantly potent as well as healthfully calm, almost to the point of

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<sup>1</sup> See Lucy Bland and Laura Doan's collection Sexology Uncensored for evidence and discussion of the diversity among sexologists, as well as individual sexologist's changes in point of view over time.

<sup>2</sup> Djuna Barnes' characterization of Robin Vote in Nightwood reflects this construction of the homosexual as atavistic.

indifference, about sexual matters. Malinowski says he doesn't mean to make a comparison, but he uses detailed descriptions of Trobriand sexual and social behavior to weave a corrective to what he presents as its opposite--overly excitable and degenerate European sexuality.

Despite protestations,<sup>3</sup> Malinowski's book is designed for his own and his readers' sexual pleasure in looking at and talking about Trobriand Islanders, their sexual habits, as well as their sensuous home. Malinowski is both voyeur and purveyor of pornography. In his first few pages, he describes his approach along the beach toward the village. "Fertile" flat expanses are broken up by occasional "tabooed groves." Following his introduction and a long, slow approach of 276 pages describing family life, kinship and economic systems, marriage rites, gender relations, courtship, always suggesting and circling around sex, he gets to what he has promised from the beginning: a close look at the sexual behaviors of his subjects that details positions, acts, favorite places, and accompanying talk and games. Malinowski wants to "see" Trobrianders in "moonlight" "follow," "spy," close the "discrete distance" between him and them. He wants readers to follow his gaze into the "intimate," the "passionate," the "intriguing" (285).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Malinowski starts his book with disclaimers meant to establish his own sexual fitness. In the preface, he assures readers that he is a scholar and not a pornographer: there is no indecent pleasure in his book, nothing "suggestive or alluring" (xxiii, xxiv) that will interest the "seeker after pornography" (xxiii), or "entice the unripe interest of the young" (xxiv). Readers, too, this preface assures, can position themselves as scientifically rather than erotically interested. Also, for Malinowski himself, any "value or interest" in the book comes only from his wife's "share in the common work" (xxviii). The reference to his wife asserts Malinowski's sexual normalcy and morality, as the book itself defines the normal and the moral: egalitarian and heterosexual. His feigned indifference to the subject of his work also claims for himself the properly matter-of-fact approach to sexuality he will describe as evidence of the particular healthfulness of Trobrianders' attitudes about sex.

<sup>4</sup> As he turns his focus to sex, he writes:

Let us return once more to a Trobriand village and approach a group of young people playing in the moonlight, in festive mood and dress; let us try to see them as they see each other; follow up their attractions and repulsions. So far we have kept at a discreet distance from the intimate behavior, the motives and feelings of lovers. More especially we have never attempted to spy upon their passionate caresses. Now we must try to reconstruct the history of a personal intrigue, to understand the first impressions made by beauty and charm, and to follow the development of a

Malinowski denies having didactic intent in his discussion of Trobriand sexuality as strongly--and as ineffectively--as he denies having erotic intent. The Trobriand jungle is "uncut" and "virgin" (10). Bathing and water constantly "rejuvenate" (172). give a "suggestive gloss of freshness" (20) or "present the human body in a fresh and stimulating light" (247). "Scrupulous cleanliness is an essential in the ideal of personal attraction" (448). Most significantly for my purposes, Malinowski describes Trobriand sexuality as normatively heterosexual in order to define European homosexuality as a product of degeneracy, over-civilization, and over-excitability. Trobriand Islanders' sexual habits, if promiscuous, produce stable loving marriages; "morality" is a constant; sexual habits are characterized by "decency," "decorum" and "modesty." Among Trobrianders, oral sex, masturbation and homosexuality are virtually unknown. Nor do Trobrianders, unlike Europeans, need the discouragement of laws and penalties to avoid homosexuality (439)<sup>5</sup> since "orgasm, in man or woman, requires more bodily contact, erotic preliminaries, and, above all, direct friction of the mucous membranes for its production." As a result, "preparatory erotic approaches . . . have less tendency to . . . develop into perversions, than is the case among nervously more excitable races" such as Europeans (477).

He does admit there is some homosexual behavior, citing the "existence of such expressions as . . . 'he copulates excrement' . . . 'he penetrates rectum' and the well-defined moral attitude towards [homosexuality]" as evidence "that sporadic cases have always occurred" (473). But it exists among Trobrianders only as the result of "unnatural" conditions imposed by whites:

Many natives are, under the present rule of whites, cooped up in gaol, on missions stations, and in plantations barracks. Sexes are separated and normal intercourse made impossible; yet an impulse trained to function

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passion to its end. (285)

<sup>5</sup> See also pages 448, 453, 469, 472.

regularly cannot be thwarted. The white man's influence and his morality, stupidly misapplied where there is no place for it, creates a setting favorable to homosexuality. The natives are perfectly well aware that venereal disease- and homosexuality are among the benefits bestowed on them by Western culture. (472-3)

Malinowski's argument about homosexuality among Trobrianders, taken literally, contradicts the characterization of homosexuality as more prevalent in Burton's Sotadic Zone. His argument, like many others, however, relies on a comparative ethnographic mode for both titillation and to admonish Europeans against homosexuality.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis (1882) does not reflect the erotic pleasure that Malinowski's work does, and his argument about homosexuality is more complex than Malinowski's claim that it is the exclusive domain of degenerate whites and those they have tainted. But comparative ethnography and reference to dark-skinned people are central to Krafft-Ebing's characterization of homosexuality.

The bulk of Krafft-Ebing's work is case studies describing homosexuality and other "perversions" among the population the book is written for--educated middle- and upper-class white men. Krafft-Ebing's goal is to differentiate pathological (congenital) homosexuality from non-pathological (acquired) homosexuality in order to give medico-juridical professionals a way to decide whom to punish for homosexuality. Pathological homosexuality--unpunishable--is a degenerative condition and always the product of some hereditary taint in combination with external influences such as the seduction of a boy or girl by a confirmed homosexual. Pathological homosexuals are diseased or insane rather than responsible and are often good and talented citizens. Alternately, non-pathological homosexuality is punishable. It usually starts with masturbation which, if unchecked, leads to a life of sensual indulgence and a refusal to be governed by morality. Moreover, sensual men are the ones who indulge in the vice of sodomy, a practice that most pathological homosexuals abhor.

About the relationship between race and homosexuality, Krafft-Ebing frames his book with remarks about civilization and morality that, as his analysis unfolds, imply that homosexuality is less strongly abhorred and thus more prevalent among "uncivilized races" - and "lower classes" (2). In civilized man, he says, sexual morality inhibits the development of sensuality, which, through the whole volume, is nearly synonymous with acquired perversion and sodomy. Alternately, "the savage races, e.g., Australasians, Polynesians, Malays of the Philippines" are "still in the uncivilized, sensual stage" (2). Similarly, it is a "well known" fact that the "southern races" have a "greater sensuality" than "the sexual needs of those of the north" (25).

As Christianity is singularly responsible for sexual morality, "we are certainly far beyond [the] sodomitic idolatry . . . of ancient Greece" (6). And Europeans are less likely to acquire perversions than "the polygamic races, and especially . . . Islam" (5). When the Christian "drags pure and chaste love from its sublime pedestal and wallows in the quagmire of sensual enjoyment and lust," it is the result of a failure of willpower--of his having lost track of the moral guides Christianity offers him (5). When others slip into sensuality, which is more likely, it is the result of their existence in a less-civilized phase of human development. This opposition also implies that when a Christian errs, he is being like a Mohammedan.

Krafft-Ebing ends his collection of case studies of homosexuality in middle- and upper-class whites by listing "ethnological data" as "interesting confirmation" of the foregoing facts concerning acquired antipathic sexual instinct (homosexuality) and effeminization (302). These ethnological data include remarks about the Scythians, the Tartars, the Apaches, the Navajos, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, and the Aztecs.

Havelock Ellis relies no less heavily on comparative ethnography than do Malinowski and Krafft-Ebbing. Ellis's multi-volume Studies in the Psychology of Sex is an attempt to catalog human variety in sexual behavior. In volume two, Sexual Inversion (1897), he argues that homosexuality is a naturally occurring human phenomenon, and that

people who are congenitally inverted ought not be punished. As proof that homosexuality is congenital and thus natural for some, he says homosexuality is no more prevalent in one nation than it is in another (4).<sup>6</sup> However, catalogs of people and places he uses as evidence contradict his point. They include some European examples: homosexuality is, for instance, strongly represented among Europeans either of particular ability or who are criminals or lunatics. But the European examples are amidst a great abundance of examples from places in Burton's "Sotadic Zone." Ellis cites Hirschfeld's idea that intermediate sexual types were especially "widespread among the Egyptians" (9). He says a recent example of modern European pederasty is the Albanians, especially the Moslems, possibly because they belong to the same stock that produced the Dorian Greeks (11). Other examples are from China, India, Afghanistan, the new world from Alaska to Brazil, Tahiti, Madagascar, the Negro population of Zanzibar (with a frequency due to Arab influence), various people and places of Africa including the Unyamweze, Uganda, the Bangala of the Upper Congo, as well as Papuans of New Guinea, primitive Australians, and the working masses of England and Scotland (who are not averse to prostituting themselves to upper-class men) Russians, Emperors in Rome, American Negroes, among whom homosexuality is much more prevalent than it is among American whites (19n). Homosexuality is evident in the Rigo district of British New Guinea among people, who "belong to a primitive race, uncontaminated by contact with white races, and practically still in the stone age" (20).

The discrepancy between Ellis's claim that homosexuality is present everywhere and the examples he chooses to prove his point has largely to do with the fact that he differentiates between congenital and acquired homosexuality. Congenital homosexuality may be spread evenly around the globe and from era to era. Acquired homosexuality cannot be evenly spread around the globe, though he doesn't say this directly, because acquired homosexuality is a direct result of social acceptance of homosexuality. Such

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<sup>6</sup> See also pages 8, 9, 264.

acceptance, and by implication an abundance of acquired homosexuality, is prevalent in the "lower races" among whom "homosexual practices are regarded with considerable indifference" and among "the lower classes." With regard to acquired homosexuality, he continues, "the uncultured man of civilization is linked to the savage" (21).

John Addington Symonds also uses a trope of racial comparison to make an argument about homosexuality among Englishmen. In Sexual Inversion: A Classic Study of Homosexuality (1928), Symonds describes ancient Greek homosexuality as it is represented in literature and histories. This Greek love taken as a model, he argues, can ennoble masculine love among his contemporaries. In contrast, the Oriental addiction to sensuality provides the negative model for masculine love.

Greek love itself is modeled on the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus—a powerful and masculine emotion "in which effeminacy had no part" (12). There is nothing "which indicates the passionate relation of the lover and the beloved" in Homer's Illiad (11), but nor did it "exclud[e] the ordinary sexual feelings" (12). Hence, Greek students of Homer "selected the friendship of Achilles for their ideal of manly love" (11) and added to it "a sensuality unknown to Homer" (17). They thus developed "that mixed form of paiderastia upon which the Greeks prided themselves" (17): a military (18), romantic (23) love that inspired great achievement (22). It was "not free from sensuality" but nor did it "degenerate into mere licentiousness" (17). The Dorian Greeks, in particular, turned this mixed paiderastia into a noble custom.

Alternately, the source of the sensuality Greeks added to the ideal masculine love is "an Oriental importation," an "Asiatic form of luxury" (14). The Greeks distinguished "whatever [they] received from adjacent nations . . . with the qualities of their own personality," but "paiderastia in its crudest form was transmitted to the Greeks from the East" (14). Herodotus may assert, Symonds argues, "that the Persians learned the habit, in its vicious form, from the Greeks," but "we know from the Jewish records and from Assyrian inscriptions that the Oriental nations were addicted to this as well as other species

of sensuality" (13). Given this information, he says, it is not reasonable to presume that Greeks were the source of crude paiderastia among all "the barbarians who were [their] neighbours" (13).

As he takes it as a matter of fact that "Oriental nations" are addicted to "crude" forms of sensuality, Symonds also presents it as a matter of fact that homosexuality is common among "savages." This kind of paiderastia, Symonds reiterates constantly, is the model to avoid: accounts of "paiderastia as it exists in various savage tribes" do not "illustrate the Doric phase of Greek love" (30) which is "almost unique in the history of the human race" (17). Rather, the "unisexual vices of barbarians" involve effeminacy such as is found among "the Scythian impotent effeminates, the North American Bardashes, the Tsecats of Madagascar, the Cordaches of the Canadian Indians, and similar classes among Californian Indians, natives of Venezuela, and so forth" (30). His "and so forth" suggests that the groups he mentions are in a class with others the reader will have no problem thinking of: they have in common the European-conferred status "primitive." Similarly, nothing about Dorian love resembles "what we know about the prevalence of sodomy among the primitive peoples of Mexico, Peru and Yucatan, and almost all half-savage nations" [emphasis mine] or "the semi-religious practices of Japanese Bonzes or Egyptian priests" (31).

Edward Carpenter's The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women (1908) differs significantly in tone from the writings discussed above, but a primitivizing, comparative ethnographic mode is still central to his argument. Carpenter celebrates contemporary British homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> The "intermediate race," he

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<sup>7</sup> He professes to exempt sodomy from praiseworthy homosexuality, finding it "gross" to the point of not being able to use the word (209). He cites Krafft-Ebing's case studies as proof that among the congenitally inverted "while bodily congress is desired, the special act with which they are vulgarly credited is in most cases repugnant to them" (209). Moreover, he claims, prohibitions and anxiety over such love are the cause of such vulgarity. Especially in schools, prohibitions pervert the purity of homogenic love and lead it away from exalted expression. But in "Self-Analysis for Havelock Ellis," he writes, "[p]ederasty, either active or passive, might seem in place to me with one I loved very devotedly and who also loved me to that degree; but I think not otherwise" (291).

claims, has a special affectional temperament, and homosexual love ranks as a great human passion with all the attendant social value, such as the advantages to boys nurtured by older boys and men. Like all love, the homogenic attachment is "the foundation of human society" with "social uses and functions which will become clearer to us the more we study it" (200).

Accordingly, Carpenter's use of cross-racial evidence serves not to define a lesser kind of homosexuality, but rather to show that people "occupying an intermediate position between the two sexes" (185) "have always, and among all peoples, been more or less known and recognized" (186), and that they have been a positive social force. In order to make this point, he chronicles great achievements among homosexuals, mostly citing European examples which he arranges chronologically from antiquity to the present. But he begins his chronicle with examples from Polynesia as if they are chronologically first. "Polynesian Islanders," he writes, are "a very gentle and affectionate people" among whom "the most romantic male friendships are (or were) in vogue" (202). He quotes Herman Melville as saying that "[i]n the annals of the island (Tahiti) are examples of extravagant friendships, unsurpassed by the story of Damon and Pythias." So strong are these friendships that "if two men of hostile tribes or islands became thus pledged to each other, then each could pass through the enemy's territory without fear of molestation or injury" (202).

His second example is African, and given as if evidence of homosexuality in Africa is especially useful for proving that homosexuality has been known among all people. Romantic love among Polynesians, he writes, is probably evidence that they have "inherit[ed] the traditions of a higher culture than they now possess." But "even among savage races lower down than [Polynesians] in the scale of evolution" such as "the Balonda and other African tribes" there is "a genuine sentiment of comradeship beginning to assert itself" (202). Footnotes refer readers to the Africa volume of the Natural History of Man

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and to Livingstone's Expedition to the Zambesi (302n). If Carpenter's logic goes, homosexuality is even in Africa, and if, as he says later, homogenic customs "have prevailed among many semi-barbaric races on the threshold of civilisation" (225) it must be everywhere.

Later in The Intermediate Sex, Carpenter cites the development of homogenic love among the "Dorian Greeks or the Polynesian Islanders or the Albanian Mountaineers, or any of the other notably hardy races among whom this affection has been developed" as disproof of Krafft-Ebing's opinion that "there is generally some neurosis or degeneration of a nerve-centre, or inherited tendency in that direction, associated with the instinct (60). It is, rather, an original human trait--a universal truth--a fact which is, following racist science, best shown by African and Polynesian examples.

Carpenter's Intermediate Sex also has a companion piece: Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk (1914). In this later work, as in the former, Carpenter seeks to show that European homosexuals "might possibly fulfil a positive and useful function" (247). Again Carpenter uses what he calls "primitive" examples as sources of human truth about homosexuality. He cites evidence that among "primitive" groups, homosexuals have often held positions of high social regard because they were believed to have highly developed spiritual, artistic, and magical powers. And he argues that these "primitive" examples are valuable for contemporary British society because "the germ" of "late and high developments" in the "slow evolution of society" has often been "indicated . . . in primitive stages" (276). His examples of this "germ" of truth for contemporary society, based largely on travel writings of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, include tribes "in the neighborhood of the Behring's Straits--the Kamchadales, the Chukchi, Aleuts, Inoits, Kadiak islanders, and so forth" (250), other North American Indians including the Illinois, Sioux, Sacs, Fox, Modoc, Louisiana, Florida, Yucatan, and Pueblo Indians (253-5), Pacific Islanders (255), the Syrians (256-8) the Negroes of the Slave Coast of West Africa (258), people throughout China, Japan and much of Malaysia

(259), the priestly castes from Mesopotamia to Peru, ancient Scandinavians, and the Konyagas in Alaska (260), Morocco (262) Pelew islanders, the Sea Dyaks of Borneo, the Bugis of South Celebes, the Patagonians of South America, people of Madagascar and Congo (264), more American Indians including Sauks, Foxes, Mandans, Crows, Blackfeet, Dakotas, Assiniboins, and Grenada (264), the tsecats of Madagascar, (274), the Areoi of Polynesia (275).

On the very first page of the introduction to Intermediate Types, Carpenter asserts that people who are congenitally between man and woman—intermediate types—exist “in considerable abundance in all ages and among all races of the world” (247). But again the logic that underlies his work is that this ubiquity, as well as the possibility that homosexuality is correlated with highly developed spiritual and artistic capacities, is best shown by cross-racial comparisons and “primitive” examples.

In “The Sexual Aberrations,” one of the essays Sigmund Freud published as Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory (1910),<sup>8</sup> Freud makes the correlation between homosexuality and “primitive races” scientific fact. His analysis is based on sexological writings, including those who assert that homosexuality is equally present in all populations.<sup>9</sup> But Freud collapses sexologists’ various claims about homosexuality and race into the assertion that homosexuality is “remarkably widespread among many savage and primitive races . . . and, even among the civilized peoples of Europe, climate and race exercise the most powerful influence on the prevalence of inversion and upon the attitude adopted towards it” (5).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The first German edition appeared in 1905, the first English translation in 1910. Later English translations are entitled Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex and Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.

<sup>9</sup> He writes, “the[se] facts . . . have been gathered from the familiar publications of Krafft-Ebing, Moll, Moebius, Havelock Ellis, Schrenk-Notzing, Lowenfeld, Eulenberg, J. Bloch, and M. Hirschfeld” (1).

<sup>10</sup> Freud makes this claim in the context of an argument that homosexuality is not degenerate.

Freud also proposes that there is a similarity between the sexuality of children, primitives and inverts. He claims that all human beings have, at some point, made at least an unconscious homosexual object-choice. This "freedom to range equally over male and female objects" characterizes "childhood," "primitive states of society," and "early periods of history" (11n). Freud's suggests here not only that what we might call bisexuality is common in "primitive states," but also that primitives and children are more similar to each other in their bisexuality than either are to adult Europeans. Finally, inverted types are like children and primitives as well. He writes:

In inverted types, a predominance of archaic constitutions and primitive psychological mechanisms is regularly to be found. Their most essential characteristics seem to be a coming into operation of narcissistic object-choice and a retention of the erotic significance of the anal zone. (12n)

Freud, in these various reiterations of the idea that homosexuality is a characteristic of so-called primitive people in particular, takes up the claims of the few sexologists who say that homosexuality is a racial characteristic and ignores the opposing claims of others. This suggests, I would argue, that the sexologists' rhetorical uses of figurations of blackness have much greater meaning-making power than their direct arguments.

In "The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris," Valerie Traub argues that even before sexologists developed a language for discussing homosexuality--by which they mostly meant male homosexuality<sup>11</sup>--early-modern travel narratives had produced the terms through which erotics between women could be represented. She argues that early-modern anatomy texts and travel narratives "generated at the same historical moment," are a discursive pair: where anatomies dissect a corpse to fashion a normative, abstract body, "travel accounts create an exoticized body that reveals the antithesis of normativity" (85).

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<sup>11</sup> Sexologists wrote almost exclusively about men, sometimes referring to lesbianism as an after-thought as if to say that lesbianism didn't exist much, or was comparable to male homosexuality, or was different to the degree that women were less sexual than men in general.

Narrators who described the New World, Africa or the East "obsessively remark upon those cultural practices that differentiate native inhabitants from Europeans" (88) including inexplicit but clear descriptions of women pleasuring one another. Such descriptions are almost always accompanied by accounts of exceedingly large clitorises. Although this same-gender female eroticism is mentioned only rarely (and nowhere as often as male sodomy) its presence is routinely associated with certain locales: Turkey and North Africa. "In the absence of narratives about similar practices among Englishwomen," Traub argues, "tales such as these imply that African and Muslim women are uniquely (if amorphously) amoral in their erotic desires and practices" (89). Hence "notwithstanding assumptions about the nonexistence or invisibility of 'lesbians' a vocabulary was available to Western writers with which to describe women's erotic desire for and contact with one another" (88).<sup>12</sup>

The point, here, is that each sexologist, despite significant differences in beliefs about homosexuality, makes his argument about white middle-class European homosexuality against a backdrop of reference to "uncivilized peoples," "lower races," "lower classes," "savages," and geographies outside of Western Europe. The sexual gauge against which European homosexuality is held is an imagined, naturally superior and/or naturally inferior, primitive being.

### **Degeneracy**

This discourse linking figurations of blackness and homosexuality is embedded in a much larger network of discourses about degeneracy and contamination. In his discussion of modern and post-modern cultures, Andreas Huyssen, argues that the defining

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<sup>12</sup> These narratives ultimately contribute to the erotic representations of Englishwomen via seventeenth-century writings by midwives. In The Midwives Book by Jane Sharp, for instance, "the first Englishwoman to write her own midwifery," Sharp explains that unnatural sex between women is frequent in India and Egypt and usually has to do with large clitorises such as she has never heard of in England (Traub 89).

characteristic of Modernism is "an anxiety of contamination" by mass culture (vii). Also discussing modern culture, David Theo Goldberg claims that degeneration is the binding principle in a set of allied terms such as corruption, pollution, purity, gentrification, and cleanliness--terms which are common to historical and present-day racist expression. It is not, he argues, that "these terms bear the same connotation whenever and wherever they have occurred." (And he speaks variously about situations specific to the United States, British, European, and African locations.) But because the terms are conceptually general, malleable and parasitic, they can "reflect prevailing social discourse at a specific time and place" but also influence the character of variously located discourses (200).

According to Goldberg, in the nineteenth century, degeneracy was a central concept to discourses defining sex, nation and race (200). A "Native" or "Negro" displaced from her "proper or normal class, national, or ethnic positions" would generate pathologies--slums, criminality, poverty, alcoholism, prostitution, disease, insanity. These pathologies, "[i]f allowed to transgress the social norms would pollute the (white) body politic and at the extreme bring about racial extinction" (200). Although Goldberg fails to include discussion of lesbianism or male homosexuality in his analysis, it is important to note that the criminality and prostitution which he does discuss as imagined products of the displacement of the "Native" or "Negro" out of her "proper . . . positions," (200) was often a cloaked reference to lesbianism. While it is an often-repeated truism that lesbianism has been mostly ignored by criminal justice systems even when male homosexuality brings convictions and harsh sentencing, Ruthann Robson argues that working-class women and women of color were prosecuted for lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s in England. Officials maintained a legal fiction that lesbianism did not exist, however, by naming the charges, ambiguously, "crimes against chastity," "lewd and lascivious behavior" or prostitution (31-2).

Annie Coombes discusses a similar specifically-imperialist use of the concept of degeneracy in art history. Degeneracy, as a theme, she argues, was central to British

Empire Exhibitions such as the one Virginia Woolf attended at Wembley in 1924.<sup>13</sup> Ethnographic exhibits were designed, Coombes argues, to reconcile the contradiction between the idea that the Benin bronzes, for instance, had high aesthetic value, with the idea that African societies were basically savage and in need of civilizing intervention. The cultures of the artists who produced the Bronzes were characterized as once-great societies that had degenerated. This discourse on degeneracy circulated with particular persistency in Britain because it was also simultaneously being used "as the basis of a critique of European colonisation in West Africa by West Africans" (38). Degeneracy results, critics of colonization argued, when Africans take up the "vices rather than the virtues of civilization." Coastal races who had had more prolonged contact with Europeans were said to have suffered the most serious deteriorations (39).

This characterization of some African societies as degenerate had everything to do with sexuality and with women's sexuality in particular. People in pictures from so-called degenerate societies were most likely to be of naked or nearly naked women while people in pictures of so-called more civilized societies to which they were being compared were clothed. Pictures of women in polygamy were also used to construct an image of degeneracy (Coombes 14). It is significant, here, I would argue, that polygamy places women in sexual relation to one another, if in a mediated way. In the pictures Coombes reproduces, this sexual link between women in polygamy is emphasized by the way in which the many wives of one man are posed reclining against one another.

The history of British Empire Exhibitions also reflects anxiety about racial degeneracy and contamination--a fear, as Goldberg describes it, that displaced 'Natives' or 'Negroes' would generate pathologies, including what were thought of as sexual pathologies. Coombes writes that the engagement of one of the performers, "billed as the son of Lobgengula, the recently subjugated leader of the Ndebele, to a Miss Kitty Jewel"

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<sup>13</sup> Woolf refers to empire exhibits several times in her works. See for instance Jacob's Room, 167, The Waves, 135-6, as well as "Thunder at Wembley."

led to criticism from the press over the impropriety of having white women in proximity to black performers. The exhibit was briefly closed to women (92) to keep middle-class white women out of the audience, though presumably women of color who worked in the exhibits were not asked to leave.

Lucy Bland and Jeffrey Weeks both discuss degeneracy as a central term in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debate about sexuality. Middle-class women were said to be causing race degeneracy and inviting the decay of the imperial race when they did not have children. Poor women, weak women, unfit women--from alcoholics to prostitutes and criminals--were said to cause degeneracy of the imperial race when they did reproduce (Bland).

Racial degeneracy was key to nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions specifically about homosexuality, as well. While many sexologists such as Havelock Ellis aimed to soften legal and social attitudes toward male homosexuality, environmentalist notions of corruption or 'degeneration' flourished alongside less condemnatory congenital theories. The corruption of youth in terms of the decay of empire was a central theme. In the 1880s, for instance, The Reverend J. M. Wilson, headmaster of Clifton college, wrote, "Rome fell: other nations have fallen: and if England falls it will be this sin, and her unbelief in God, that will have been her ruin" (Weeks, Coming Out 107). "Sin" here referred to masturbation, but masturbation, Weeks argues, especially in the context of the public school, was intimately linked to male homosexuality.

Weeks argues that such moralisms were also commonplaces of twentieth-century culture. In the early 1900s, for instance, Sidney and Beatrice Webb made similar connections between homosexuality and national decay. Weeks argues that the open practice of homosexuality in China

was proof, for them, of the degeneracy of the Chinese. Beatrice Webb visited numerous "boys' homes" for male prostitutes while in China in 1911, and commented in her diary in typical fashion: "it is the rottenness of

physical and moral character that makes one despair of China--their constitution seems devastated by drugs and abnormal sexual indulgence. They are essentially an unclean race." (Coming Out 19)

With regard to lesbianism in particular, Linda Hart shows that lesbianism among white women enters historical discourse as the product of taint and intrusion in a 1921 juridical decision. Based on the idea, suggested by sexological writings, that homosexuality, including lesbianism (though lesbianism is much less directly discussed than male homosexuality) was common among dark-skinned and working-class women, British legislators in 1921 opposed the institution of legal sanctions against lesbian sexuality. They reasoned as follows: lesbianism was better left unmentioned since 999 of 1000 "women" had probably never heard of such behaviors, but would be tainted by exposure to them if lesbianism were explicitly prohibited (Hart 3-4). The legislators were afraid, specifically, of "taint," and "suspicion" being "imparted" into "the homes of this country" (4). Embedded in the logic of this decision is an identity for "woman" as distinct from dark-skinned or working-class women (Hart 4). In addition, lesbianism is constructed as that which, if not secreted, is liable to spread and contaminate others: contact with the displaced--the black, the criminal, the working-class--makes lesbians out of "women" (white, middle-class, feminine-looking non-lesbians by definition).<sup>14</sup>

The combination of these histories does not add up to a simple equation between figurations of blackness or degeneracy and lesbianism in either the U.S. or England in any specific historical period. None of the theorists and historians here make that claim; nor do I want to make that claim about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British or U.S. cultures or about the authors I am studying. And I must emphasize that by the 1930s, Woolf and Warner, if not Cather, were strongly resisting prohibitions and censorship of

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<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is interesting to note that during the trial involving The Well of Loneliness, which she attended, Virginia Woolf described Radclyffe Hall as "lemon yellow, tough, stringy, exacerbated" (Diary 3: 207).

homosexuality and lesbianism, including censorship based on rhetorical linkages between homosexuality and decay. However, lesbianism and male homosexuality, blackness, disease, criminality, working-class status, taint, pollution and prostitution co-exist as multiple features of the trope of degeneracy in the imbricated discourses of sex, race and nation in nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both England and the U.S. They are linked as locations for the "displacement of deviant sexuality" away from "the worlds where [white legislators of turn of the century England] wished to keep their wives and daughters" (Hart 4). And they are linked, as well, in writings which aimed to soften attitudes toward male homosexuality and/or lesbianism by showing that homosexuality was prevalent in a sodadic zone. In brief, race science was also sex science, and visa versa. Because of these linkages, when a dark or working-class body is figured as the embodiment of sexuality, and when such figures show up alongside white middle-class female bodies, it is useful to wonder if and how lesbianism is also being figured.

My claim about Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Willa Cather is that each relies on assumptions similar to these evident in sexological writings and the discourse of degeneracy in their efforts to represent and simultaneously not represent lesbianism. Woolf and Warner are both critical of imperialism, including the displacement of sexuality onto colonial scenes and people. Cather often explores and sometimes challenges the racial, ethnic, and sexual boundaries of United States citizenship in her fiction. But when it comes to lesbianism, each also seems to be participating in, or simply reflecting, a variation of sexual displacement that is also central to sexological writings.

### Three: Empire, Social Rot, and Sexual Fantasy in The Waves

Given the interdependence of turn of the century discourses of empire and sex. I propose that the anti-imperialism and the Sapphism of Virginia Woolf's The Waves (1931) - are overlapping themes that need to be examined in relation to each other. Recurring motifs in the novel bring Sapphism and anti-imperialism together. These motifs are rot and purulence, rise and fall, the metaphoric description of waves as "turbaned warriors . . . advancing upon the . . . white sheep" (75), and Rhoda's constant reference to darkness, distance, and colonial places where other characters refer to sex or sensuality. Woolf uses these figurations of blackness and colonial place, I argue, to carry Sapphism as what Roland Barthes would call a third meaning--an "obtuse" meaning that exists like a fold or crease beyond the obvious meanings of communication and signification (55); a meaning that rides "'on the back' of articulated language" but evades description by critics' metalanguage (62). The anti-imperialism in The Waves is one of its "obvious meanings."<sup>1</sup> Another meaning emerges, beyond intent and symbol, largely through juxtaposition, because of these obvious meanings--because of Woolf's politics, because of the histories and discourses of sexology, anthropology, eugenics and colonialism--and despite them at the same time.

Virginia Woolf's The Waves is most commonly read as a modernist experiment with form. In its planning stages, Woolf imagined the novel as a "serious, mystical poetical work," a "play-poem" and an "eyeless book;" later she thought it had "resolve[d] into a series of dramatic soliloquies" (Diary 3: 131, 139, 203, 312). While it is fiction, it is also part of her life-long project to remake life-writing, as she called biographical as well as fictional accounts of lives.<sup>2</sup> The novel tells seven life stories, but "give[s] in a very few

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<sup>1</sup> The anti-imperialism of The Waves is not obvious to all readers. Much criticism proceeds without mentioning Woolf's references to empire at all. Nonetheless, these references are concrete and direct, however you interpret them, while Sapphism is much less directly figured.

<sup>2</sup> Hermione Lee calls life-writing a "perpetual preoccupation" of Woolf's "essays and diaries and fiction" (4).

strokes the essentials of a person's character. . . . almost like caricature" (Diary 3: 300).

Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda speak, one by one, their impressions: of the nursery and the classroom, of college, marriage, friendship, sex, death, children, and Percival--the seventh character who never speaks at all. The lives shown in these soliloquies are not lives of the great, nor does the form Woolf develops follow traditions of biography she had inherited from Victorians such as her father, whose major life work was the Dictionary of National Biography. Woolf leaves out detail not to glorify, purify, or resolve, but rather to eliminate what she calls the "waste" of the "appalling narrative business of the realist" (Diary 3: 209).

Rhythm rather than plot drives The Waves (Diary 3: 316). A few things do happen: Percival goes to India, falls off a horse and dies; Rhoda makes a suicidal leap from a cliff in response; Louis builds a career; Neville falls in love; Bernard marries; Susan has children; Jinny seduces. But there are no chapters detailing a progression of events and thus moving the novel from beginning to end. Rather, the novel progresses by perpetual "beginning again" as Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it (105-7), and by repetitions of a motif of rise and fall. In the interludes, the sun rises out of the waves in jeweled brilliance and passes in an arc from a watery horizon into a shadowed, solid, hilly one. Waves "heap" themselves, emerge, and fall repeatedly back into the sea. In the interludes, birds circle high up, "descend like a net" (182) and dive beneath leaves into purulence. A house and garden appear indistinctly at dawn, flash sharp white edges in the midday sun, and finally yield to shadow.

In the midst of this rise and fall, the elements of the novel--the birds, the house, the waves, the characters--as well as the interludes and soliloquies are linked to each other by juxtaposition and parallelism. As the sun crosses the sky, characters progress from youth to old age and death. As individual waves emerge and reintegrate, Woolf momentarily isolates each voice in soliloquy before letting them fall again into silence, finally subsuming

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them all into Bernard, the story maker's, summing up. Each character metaphorically "rise[s] into this dim light" among his peers as Louis says, proud of his own rise from colonial outsider to shipping administrator, and disappears into sometimes painful and sometimes soothing anonymity (35).

Also part of the rhythm of rise and fall, modern humanity itself is depicted as having risen, feebly and temporarily, from a subterranean primal past. When Bernard's future wife accepts his proposal, he imagines that he can "sink down" into a "general life" where "[t]he growl of traffic might be any uproar—forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel. . . . [O]ur bodies are in truth naked. . . . and beneath these pavements are shell, bones and silence" (113). And there is, squatting in Bernard and causing him "great difficulty sometimes in controlling," a "savage, the hairy man . . . whose speech is guttural, visceral," and who "point[s] with his half-idiot gestures of greed and covetousness at what he desires" (289-90).

The importance of rhythm, juxtaposition and parallelism in The Waves, and the corresponding absence of narrative progression can make it difficult to make claims about Woolf's meanings. The Sapphism I discuss below is vaguely suggested: the connections I emphasize are loose ones; Rhoda's references to colony are indirect responses to other characters' references to sex. But embedded in Woolf's title is the suggestion to make much of such vagueness: Woolf's The Waves has the French les vagues as an echo,<sup>3</sup> and vague connections and references are as ubiquitous in the novel as the rise and fall of waves. Linear progression is not the way details and their significance are revealed. Rather, juxtaposition, repetition and echo make meanings in The Waves, including the Sapphic meanings I will discuss below. Vague connections and distant echoes are important; juxtapositions and references that seem irrelevant in single instances build significance by their recurrence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Les Vagues is the title of Marguerite Yourcenar's translation of The Waves into French.

<sup>4</sup> Juxtaposition is vitally important in others of Woolf's works. Perhaps the most obvious

### Rot and Purulence, Maggots and Intruders

Read with attention to the features I describe above. The Waves is a characteristic work of high modernism involving formal experimentation with non-linear structures and prototypically modernist themes of alienation, fragmentation and savagery. Beginning with Jane Marcus, however, critics have also focused on the political engagement and anti-imperialism of Woolf's work in general, and of The Waves in particular.<sup>5</sup> In "Britannia Rules The Waves," Marcus challenges critical approaches to the novel that charge it with being difficult and elite and recuperates The Waves as anti-imperialist. Subsequent to Marcus's essay, it is clear, even to one critic who mostly disagrees with her, that "interpretations of Woolf's novel can [no longer] legitimately ignore its political content" (McGee 631). The Waves, as Marcus describes it, is an exploration of the imperialism and the nationalism of canon, of "the way in which the cultural narrative 'England' is created by an Eton/Cambridge elite who (re)produce the national epic (the rise of . . .) and elegy (the fall of . . .) in praise of the hero" (137). Direct references to India as "dark, dirty, disordered and . . . threatening" occur nineteen times in the novel; each of Woolf's characters expresses distinctly imperialist sentiment, defining him- or herself as civilized "only by imagining Britain's colonies as savage" (157). And Woolf's incorporation of hundreds of lines of well-known romantic poems is part of an attack on a literary mode fully involved with imperialist aggression and expansion: the "Romantic quest for a self

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example is in Three Guineas where pictures of men in uniforms signaling military, juridical, and academic rank are juxtaposed with text about war. By this juxtaposition, Woolf implicates patriarchal hierarchies of all kinds with the tyranny of the fascism that is on the rise in 1930s Europe.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf herself said that her chief goal was "to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Diary 2: 248). Kathy Phillips, in a book devoted to describing the anti-imperialist stance in Woolf's work, argues that Woolf uses juxtaposition of detail and imagery to "map social vistas," orient the reader's gaze toward links between empire, militarism, and gender relations, and to satirize those links (xxvii). By 1997, enough had been written about Woolf's anti-imperialism for Hermione Lee to presume, in her biography, that readers would understand all Woolf's work as politically engaged.

and definition of the (white male) self against the racial or sexual Other" (137).

A few critics have also discussed the subtle lesbian content of The Waves. Ruth Vanita argues that Neville and Rhoda are doubles united by their homoerotic interests. Neville studies Greek and Latin as models of homoeroticism and is associated with Shakespeare's homoerotic sonnets in the novel. Rhoda is excluded from the study of Greek and Latin for models of unconventional love, but "is a portrait of a Victorian Sappho" who "[a]rticulate[s] her attraction to women in a language drawn from the Romantics, especially Shelley" and who "leaps to her death by drowning, as Sappho did in legend and as Woolf was to do in reality a decade later" (205-6). Julie Abraham points out that Rhoda's sense that she often dies "pierced with arrows" is a reference to the gay icon St. Sebastian and thus "underlines the possibility of a reading of Rhoda as matched with Neville" (155).

Annette Oxindine argues that Woolf clearly marks Rhoda as a lesbian in the holograph drafts of The Waves and leaves traces of this lesbianism in the final version. In early drafts of The Waves, Rhoda is enthralled by a girl named Alice at her all-girls' school. A look at Alice is "staggering," and provides material for dreams she enjoys alone in bed at night (H123). In these dreams, Alice's lips always fade "just as she is about to kiss her" (H123). Woolf also lists Rhoda's dream of Alice on the same notebook page on which she writes "love for other girls" (H750).

In the published version of the novel, there are hints and remnants of what might be taken as marks of lesbianism. Rhoda's love for the fellow student, Alice, becomes attraction for the teacher Ms. Lambert, whose ring gives off a purple "amorous" light (33) and under whose eyes, everything becomes luminous (45). Ms. Lambert, as does Alice of the drafts, makes Rhoda dream (45). These dreams do not include kisses with girls, but the soliloquy that in early drafts contains kisses with Alice includes explicitly female-centered sexuality. Rhoda says:

There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on

some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists. Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail. Now my body thaws; I am unsealed. I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilizing, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? (Waves 57)

This passage is erotic, and reminiscent of the often-quoted and more clearly lesbian passage in Mrs. Dalloway, in which Clarissa has a sudden revelation of pressure, yielding, cracking and flowing followed by the vision of a match burning in a crocus (47).<sup>6</sup>

But without knowing the drafts of The Waves, or making comparisons with lesbian passages in Mrs. Dalloway, the lesbianism of the final version of The Waves is so subtle as to be almost absent. Annette Oxindine attributes this to self-censorship, arguing that Woolf's "fear of being labelled a lesbian, and therefore not being taken seriously, substantially affects the composition process of The Waves" (173).<sup>7</sup>

Self-censorship in The Waves has everything to do with the 1928 obscenity trial involving Radclyffe Hall's overtly lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness. Woolf among other Bloomsburies attended the trial to testify on Hall's behalf, though Woolf did not much like Hall's book.<sup>8</sup> Woolf's writings around the time of the trial show that she thought repeatedly about the trial and the censorship of lesbianism it represented. In A Room of One's Own (1929), Woolf's narrator pauses in her reading of Mary

<sup>6</sup> Many critics have discussed the lesbian eroticism of Sally's kiss and the orgasmic description of a crocus in Mrs. Dalloway. See Gay Wachman's essay "Pink Icing and a Narrow Bed" and "Crosswriting the Empire" for comprehensive discussions of the ways in which Woolf explores lesbianism in Mrs. Dalloway.

<sup>7</sup> See Gay Wachman's "Crosswriting the Empire" for an analysis of the atmosphere of repression between 1880 and World War I. Wachman emphasizes the importance of imperialist discourse and discusses several anti-homosexual trials, the most famous being those against Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall, but also including the lawsuit against the bookseller of Havelock Ellis' and J.A Symonds' Sexual Inversion (1897).

<sup>8</sup> Woolf was never called to take the stand. See The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. III pages 193, and 206-7; The Letters of Virginia Woolf, vol. III pages 520, 529-30, 555, and 563. See also Hermione Lee's Virginia Woolf pages 524-527.

Charmichael's novel when she gets to the line "Chloe liked Olivia." Before she continues, she wants to be assured that "there are no men present" and that "Sir Chartres Biron is not concealed" behind "that red curtain" (82-3). Sir Chartres Biron was the magistrate who pronounced Hall's novel obscene in November, 1928.<sup>9</sup> In her diary Woolf records her fear of being "attacked for a feminist & hinted at for a Sapphist" over the content of Room (Diary 3: 262). Also, revisions to the manuscript version of Orlando (1928) include excisions of "references to Sappho, to Orlando's 'lusts' and her love-affairs with women" (Lee 524).<sup>10</sup>

But if lesbianism is scarce at best in the final version of The Waves, rot, corruption, purulence, mixing, staining are ubiquitous. This motif of degeneracy is central to the novel's depictions of empire and imperialists; it is aligned to male homosexuality as if Woolf were responding to linkages J.M. Wilson and other moral purity campaigners made between male homosexuality and imperial decay;<sup>11</sup> and it is central to Woolf's evocations of lesbianism. Of course Woolf is not invoking degeneracy to inspire fear for the success of empire. Rather, she seems to revel in degeneracy in a way that predicts and invites the fall of empire. If Woolf's characters obsess about "rise" and self re-creation--about figuratively holding themselves up out of the waves of water and time that surround and threaten them with obscurity--Woolf takes perverse glee in degeneracy and obscurity as well as fall. In the context of discourses of empire and sex that are dependent on motifs of degeneracy, Woolf marks her novel as rebellious in a specifically sexual way by filling her anti-imperialist novel with an abundance of corruption, staining, intrusion and taint.

Much of the anti-imperialism of Woolf's novel comes, as Jane Marcus has

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<sup>9</sup> See Vera Brittain's Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?

<sup>10</sup> The more significant reason Woolf got away with writing the distinctly Sapphic novel Orlando while Radclyffe Hall's novel was banned is that Orlando is fantastic rather than realist fiction.

<sup>11</sup> See the section on degeneracy in chapter two above.

described, from the emphasis on fall in the repeating rise and fall of the novel; in addition, ubiquitous biological corruption amplifies Woolf's anti-imperialist emphasis on fall. Rot is densest in the interludes. The birds are vicious invaders into purulence that generate even more rot.<sup>12</sup> They are "ruthless and abrupt," tap snail shells against stones until "something slimy ooze[s]" (109). One "spike[s] the soft, monstrous body of the defenseless worm," leaving it to "fester." They dig among the roots where flowers "decay," "gusts of dead smells waft," and "drops form on the bloated sides of swollen things": where matter oozes "too thick to run" from the broken skins of rotten fruit. There is monstrosity as well as decay where "[y]ellow excretions [are] exuded by slugs" and an "amorphous body with a head at either end" sways slowly from side to side (75).

Similarly, in the soliloquies characters talk constantly of biological rot and corruption and are ever-anxious about the corruption of their individuality by contact with others who mix, intrude, disperse, overwhelm, or adulterate. In the nursery, Louis mourns that "all is shattered" when Jinny kisses him (12). Seeing this kiss makes Susan want to "die in a ditch in the brown water where dead leaves have rotted" (15). Neville is ambivalent about Bernard's company on a riverbank: "how painful to be . . . mitigated, to have one's self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another" (83). Susan also resists what she calls "mixing"; she "cannot be tossed about, or float gently, or mix with other people" (98). Louis feels dissolved and overwhelmed by darkness when he comes together with others. At the second dinner party, he mourns "we are gone. . . . Our separate drops are dissolved: we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness" (225). Also at the second dinner party, Rhoda says she has "dreaded" humanity, hideous and squalid. She says "I have been stained by you and corrupted" (203).

This fear of mixing—or hybridity—reflects imperialist discourse. Woolf emphasizes this when characters' thoughts of rot or corruption are simultaneously an expression of

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<sup>12</sup> In Bernard's summing up, Woolf suggests that the birds and the children are one and the same.

his/her imperial consciousness. In the wood Bernard makes up a game about being explorers, discoverers of an unknown land where he and his friends "tread on rotten oak apples, red . . . and slippery," and hear "the patter of some primeval fir-cone falling to rot - among the ferns" (17). In his summation, Bernard exposes the centrality of stained whiteness to his self-concept. He thinks of the characters' childhood selves as "virginal wax that coats the spine and melts in different patches for each of us," and then reflects that "our white wax was streaked and stained" (241).

Neville imagines that Bernard will tell Susan a story about "the big blade . . . an emperor; the broken blade a Negro," and then reflects "I hate wandering and mixing things together" (19). This prefigures Neville's adult insistence on imperialist differentiation between himself and Other. Wandering is a reference to Jews and Gypsies as well as imperialist voyages; the hatred for "mixing things" is in accord with imperialist and eugenicist anxiety over miscegenation and racial degeneracy. Later Neville will assert his distaste for "the waste and deformity of the world, its crowds, eddying" (180).

Corruption in general is figured as a characteristic of empire and imperialism throughout the novel. The story Bernard tells Susan links rotting and colony. He says, "[h]ere come warm gusts of decomposing leaves, of rotting vegetation." And "[w]e are in a swamp now; in a malarial jungle. There is an elephant white with maggots, killed by an arrow shot dead in its eye" (22). Corrupting and whitening are the same, here, suggesting that the degeneracy often associated with colonized places in imperialist rhetoric is the product, in Woolf's eyes, of white intrusion rather than an inherent quality of Africa, America or Asia. In Bernard's summation, the elephant reappears as "a rat wreathing with maggots under a rhubarb leaf" (240) and "the rat swarming with maggots" (241).

An animal reminiscent of the shot and rotting elephant/rat reemerges later as a metaphor for London and as a symbol of the interconnectedness of mother country and colony. On a train, Bernard sees "[m]en clutch their newspapers envisaging death. . . . We are about to explode in the flanks of the city like a shell in the side of some ponderous,

maternal, majestic animal" (111). London's fate, here, is the same as that of the pierced elephant rotting in a colony: "We" are the missile which blindly charges. A soliloquy of Rhoda's also suggests that "we" are both the maggots corrupting the colonial beast, and simultaneously the torpid, gorged, and endangered beast itself. Reflecting on Percival's death, she says, "[w]e cluster like maggots on the back of something that will carry us on." And "[w]e lie gorged with food, torpid in the heat" (162).

The image of a rotting colonial beast, itself corrupting, fed on by vultures, and corrupting the empire comes up again when characters think of Percival's career. Rhoda reflects that because Percival advances heroically down a solitary path, "the outermost parts of the earth . . . India for instance, rise into our purview . . . [R]emote provinces are fetched up out of darkness." But Rhoda also sees "muddy roads, twisted jungle, swarms of men, and the vulture that feeds on some bloated carcass as within our scope, part of our proud and splendid province" (137). Percival's reign as a colonial ruler is fraught with decay in Bernard's vision, too:

I see India. . . . I see the tortuous lanes of stamped mud that lead in and out among ramshackle pagodas; I see the gilt and crenelated buildings which have an air of fragility and decay as if they were temporarily run up buildings in some Oriental exhibition. (135-6)

Woolf also figures reprisal from the colonized in racialized images of intrusion and taint. In many interludes, images of waves are personified as turbaned African warriors whose backs curve and who mass themselves, threatening white flocks. In one, "[t]he wind rose. The waves drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors, like turbaned men with poisoned assegais who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep" (75). The words "assegais" and "turbaned" mark these figures as dark-skinned others: the use of "warriors" as opposed to "soldiers" primitivizes them.

These warriors, as well as the vicious birds and the rot, surround and threaten the house Woolf describes in the interludes. As houses are elsewhere in Woolf's writings, this

house is metonymic for both imperialism and also for patriarchy and male control of women's sexuality.<sup>13</sup> The sun overcomes darkness in and around this house in early interludes, but the house is finally obscured by darkness. Early on, shadow is but a "blue fingerprint . . . under the leaf by the bedroom window" near a "white blind" that "stirred slightly" (8). Shadow and "impenetrable darkness" hover, but light repeatedly "drives darkness before it" (110). In bright light, the house has "formidable corners," and white walls "glare" between dark windows. Shadows are contained: they "hang" in a specific "zone," "encumber" a few objects, are "heaped up" in "mounds," and only "suggest still denser depths of darkness" (110, 150, 166).

Later soliloquies figure shadows as intruders into the house successfully overwhelming the "weakening" brightness of the sun. Objects in the darkening house are ponderous: they "portend;" they become obscure rather than distinct and sharp. The shadows that lengthen on the beach suggest progress of those warriors toward the white flocks. Shadows "eddy around" and then "engulf individuals," "blot out" couples, and "cover" girls on verandas looking at snow. Darkness "rolls," "envelops" and "mounts." Blackness shoots, and is "a vast curtain" (208, 236-7).

Woolf's motif of a darkening, invaded house makes a specific critique of the sexual displacement and the control over female sexuality that are both central to imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Years and Orlando, for instance.

<sup>14</sup> Critiques of the link between sexuality and empire occur in many of Woolf's writings. Kathy Phillips has described such critiques, arguing that all of Woolf's work shows the displacement of sexuality onto the colonized as a secondary motive, after economics, to colonialism and militarism. Phillips writes that Woolf's:

investigation of displacement forms one of her most interesting and original contributions to an understanding of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout her novels, men who are unsure of themselves sexually try to enhance their prowess by positioning themselves next to the immensity of the Empire. (236)

Woolf also critiques the use of myths about the chastity of white women and the lasciviousness of colonized people—myths used to justify colonialism. Phillips argues that in Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf juxtaposes a colonizer calling for more troops with girls buying white underlinen for their weddings in order to show that "the brawler and his society require pure white virginity as one of the justifications for quelling rebellions" (228). As Phillips also points out, in "The Royal Academy," Woolf says explicitly that "scenes from

Objects within the house, in addition to being white or having mass and edge, are also tinted with colors "like the bloom on the skin of ripe fruit" (110). Objects with that coloring--like the bloom on ripe fruit--especially in a whitening house--evoke clichéd phrases (blushing-bride, pink-cheeked) praising young white girls for both innocence and sexual desirability. Woolf gives direct expression to the idealization of pink cheeks on white girls in one passage: Bernard reports that Percival thought "Lucy's flaxen pigtails and pink cheeks were the height of female beauty" (243). Woolf thus makes connections between imperialist activity, embodied in Percival, and the idealization of the appearance of women with flaxen hair and pink cheeks. In the context of this critique of the sexual politics of imperialism. Woolf's juxtapositions between whiteness with a ripe bloom, warriors racing on the white flocks, a house whitened by the sun in the morning and overwhelmed by shadow in the evening--especially shadows that leave fingerprints on white blinds outside bedrooms, blot out couples, cover girls, and mount--figure specifically sexual intrusion and taint.<sup>15</sup> In the context of discourse about empire and sex, sexual intrusion and taint includes sexual rebellion on the parts of women including promiscuity, miscegenation, prostitution, high or low reproductivity depending on the racial and class status of the woman one is talking about, and lesbianism. Woolf figures this intrusion and taint both to provoke fear, and to mock that fear.

These figurations of corruption, sexual intrusion, and taint in The Waves comprise Woolf's critique of the imperial consciousness of those "white flocks" who fear fall and mixing and staining and adulteration throughout the novel. Her figurations of blackness as

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Rudyard Kipling" give maidens occasion to insist on their chastity and gallant officers occasion to protect it (Essays 3: 90).

<sup>15</sup> A soliloquy of Rhoda's later in the novel also puts these "blue fingerprints"--shadows from leaves--in a place distant, dark, and also sexual. "Dark leaved bushes" and "their darkness" are characteristics of a distant place into which Rhoda constantly looks to "fill [her nights] fuller and fuller with dreams," and where she imagines she sees "a shape, white [perhaps herself] . . . moving, perhaps alive" against "their [the leaves'] darkness" (139). The dreams Rhoda mentions recur in the novel and in the holograph drafts are the more specifically sexual dreams about kissing Alice.

intrusion into a white house, of primitivized warriors threatening white flocks and polluting the white body--these are what, in Goldberg's characterization of the discourse of race and degeneracy, leads to disease, criminality, prostitution, and are all, in turn, evocative of homosexuality in the context of sexological discourses. A middle-class white woman who celebrates this corruption and intrusion, especially in the context of an anti-imperialist argument, marks her novel as rebellious in a specifically sexual way.

### **Male Homosexuality in The Waves**

Woolf's references to male homosexuality also mark her novel as both sexually rebellious and anti-imperialist by mocking the connections moral purity campaigners made between male homosexuality and the destruction of empire. Sitting in chapel, the homosexual character Neville is irritated that "words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them," by "a brute who menaces [his] liberty" (35). Moral purity campaigners did menace the liberty of boys/men like Neville by equating homosexuality with the corruption of religion and empire. But Neville makes connections between homosexuality and religion differently than do advocates of moral purity. "[T]his sad religion," he says, is "tremulous, grief-stricken figures advancing . . . down a white road shadowed by fig trees where boys sprawl in the dust--naked boys" (35). And he occupies himself in chapel by thinking of Percival's perfections, one of which is that "he would make an admirable churchwarden. He should have a birch and beat little boys" (36). Neville understands chapel and the bible in terms of their homoeroticism and is irritated that the headmaster's reading corrupts his own homoerotically charged versions.<sup>16</sup> Woolf did not believe male homosexuality would bring on the fall of empire, but the idea that it might would have been something to celebrate rather than fear.

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<sup>16</sup> See Ruth Vanita's Sappho and the Virgin Mary for a discussion of the homoeroticism associated with medieval and Romantic uses of myths of Mary and Jesus, and ways in which Woolf's The Waves participates in this Romantic tradition.

Woolf also makes reference to Shakespeare's homoerotic sonnets, literally corrupting the pages of the poem with decaying flowers and simultaneously making those decaying flowers, as well as the poetry, metonymic for homoeroticism.<sup>17</sup> When the characters are in college, Neville anxiously throws Bernard a poem he has written about loving Percival. In response, Bernard compares Neville's homoerotic poem to "press[ing] flowers between the pages of Shakespeare's sonnets" (88). Later, the pressed flowers literally corrupt Shakespeare's pages. Mourning Percival, Neville mentions "Plato and Shakespeare" and then reflects that "[c]olours always stain the page" of the poem, which is "you," Percival, his lover, and literary heroes (181). Still later, waiting in his room for his lover, he chooses a book from the shelf and reads "half a page of anything." But "one cannot read this poem without effort. The page is often corrupt and mud stained, and torn and stuck together with faded leaves, with scraps of verbena or geranium" (198).

The lover, a homosexual relationship, the poem, and corruption of the flowers are conflated in these passages. This juxtaposition of corruption and homosexuality certainly evokes the rhetoric of moral purity campaigners. It also points to the end of a prior age of British Empire building. But the convergence of male homosexuality and corruption in a novel inviting as well as fearing the decay of empire does not express the same fear of homosexuality that moral purity campaigners sought to inspire. Rather, it mocks the associations they made between homosexuality and corruption.

### **Colony and Sapphism: Sexual Displacement**

But if Woolf is often derisive and critical of imperialist ideologies, she also seems

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<sup>17</sup> Woolf and her friends saw homoeroticism in the sonnets. Hermione Lee reports that in a joke cut from the manuscript of *Orlando*, Orlando's biographer reports having torn up and burned Shakespeare's account of his relations with Mr. W.H. and the dark Lady because "there was much in those pages of an impure nature" (Lee 524). For further discussion of homoeroticism in Shakespeare's sonnets see Jonathan Goldberg's *Queering the Renaissance* and *Sodometries*, Gregory Bredbeck's *Sodomy and Interpretation*, Joseph Pequigney's *Such is my Love*, Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men* and Bruce Smith's *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*. For further discussion of Woolf's use of Shakespeare's sonnets in *The Waves* see my essay "Supplanting Shakespeare's Rising Sons."

to be participating in, or simply reflecting, a variation of sexual displacement that is part of colonialist ideologies: she relies on figurations of blackness and references to colony and degeneracy to work as place-holders for Rhoda's lesbianism where it can't be expressed directly. My argument is loosely parallel to Morrison's theory of American Africanism: figurations of blackness do not express lesbianism in The Waves, but rather Woolf inserts figurations of blackness as if they will carry Sapphism as one of their possible meanings--as if Woolf assumes such figurations have a capacity to replace or stand in for references to lesbianism. She seems, in this way, to reflect one aspect of the overlap between discourses of sex and empire that she otherwise critiques.

One of the ways in which this displacement is manifest is that where other characters refer directly to heterosexuality or male homosexuality, Rhoda mentions, or others mention in relation to her, Africa, India, Turks, distant places, dark pools, darkness, swallows (significantly, migrating birds whose path includes England and Africa), tigers and columns. The columns are perhaps Roman or Greek, both parts of the sodadic zone Burton described. In addition, Rhoda is the character most strongly linked, in terms of her sexuality and in general, to the men with assegais and to the purulence into which the snails dig in the interludes. In these ways, Woolf links Rhoda's lesbian sexuality--specifically and importantly unspoken sexuality--with colonized places, degeneracy, migration, and distant places including Greece.

In Rhoda's first long soliloquy, Woolf's use of punctuation suggests a parallel between lesbianism and the image of a white woman in a primitivized, colonial place: both are what must be spoken indirectly. Playing a game in which flower petals in a basin of water are ships, Rhoda exposes an anxious desire to claim untainted whiteness for her self-definition: "[a]ll my ships are white," she says. "I do not want red petals of hollyhocks or geranium. I want white petals that float . . . . One sails alone. That is my ship." The others "have foundered, all except my ship which mounts the wave and sweeps before the gale and reaches the islands where the parrots chatter and the creepers . . ." [final ellipses in

the original] (18-9).

Jane Marcus has pointed out that in A Room Of One's Own, Woolf uses ellipses to indicate female desire when it is the object of censorship ("Sapphistry" 169).<sup>18</sup> The three dots that signify the narrator's pause before reading "Chloe liked Olivia" (83). Marcus argues, are code for lesbian love. This ellipsis is even more explicitly about both lesbianism and censorship in an early draft of Room. Woolf's narrator, reading Mary Carmichael's book, reports:

<I read> "Chloe liked Olivia; they shared a \_\_\_\_\_," the words came at the bottom of the page; the pages had stuck; while fumbling to open them there flashed into my mind the inevitable policemen; the summons; the order to attend the court; the dreary waiting; the Magistrate coming in with a little bow; the glass of water; the counsel for the prosecution; for the defence; the verdict; this book is obscene. . . . Here the pages came apart. Heaven be praised! it was only a laboratory. [Second ellipsis mine. Canceled words not shown] (Lee 525-26).

Here, the ellipsis at the beginning of the passage marks the deferral of the end of a sentence. In the space left by this deferral, scenes from the obscenity trial against the publishers of Hall's Well of Loneliness flash through the narrator's mind, temporarily filling the ellipsis with censorable lesbianism. Comically, the deferred word turns out to be "laboratory." Woolf's narrator, to her relief, needn't read the unmentionable; Woolf herself has referred to lesbianism and at the same time left it unnamed except as an elliptical something that might have been said.

Similarly, in Rhoda's soliloquy, quoted above, Rhoda represents that which can't be said as what a white girl/woman imagines she does after reaching a colonial place.<sup>19</sup> If

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<sup>18</sup> Using an example from Jacob's Room, Kathy Phillips argues that Woolf's breaks and ellipses "do not testify merely to [modernist] sportive 'free play'" of signifiers. Rather "breaks and ellipses yield a coherent pattern of satire" (xiv).

<sup>19</sup> Later in the novel Rhoda also characterizes herself as one who lies and prevaricates in

Woolf's use of ellipses in general is suggestive of lesbianism, and more arguably so in this case considering the fact that lesbianism is literally what Woolf has repressed in Rhoda. then in Rhoda's soliloquy the image of a white woman in a colonial place is coupled with lesbianism through the trope of ellipsis: both are that which can't be spoken.

What Rhoda does say makes a similar correlation: when other characters talk of sex or sensuality, Rhoda talks of Africa or India or decay or men with assegais. This is apparent in soliloquies about the dance party Jinny and Rhoda attend together. Jinny characterizes the party as both titillating and sexually important: it is "rapture," "relief," "ecstasy," "risk," "adventure." She is "admitted to the warmth and privacy of another soul" (104). But for Rhoda, the party is terrifying, and her description is full of reference to colonial places. Tigers leap and pursue. A million arrows pierce her. She sees "the wild thorn tree shake its shadow in the desert."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, during the party Rhoda thinks of herself as whiteness amidst the waves, which have become, by this point in the novel, always a reference to warriors with assegais racing on the white flocks. Significantly, she is not being pursued by the waves/warriors here, as she is elsewhere, but is amidst them. She is "the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness" amidst the breaking waves (107).

Among the images she calls up to protect herself are also suggestions of darkness and distance: "Pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools" (105). And she thinks back to the game she played

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opposition to Jinny's sexual truthfulness about "dealing her looks adroitly here and there" (106).

<sup>20</sup> An English thorn tree would be a Hawthorne, but Woolf specifies a desert thorn tree, which is the African thorn tree, ubiquitous in East and Southern Africa. African thorn trees do make a striking and large and shaky shadow since they grow solitary on relatively flat ground and spread out at the top like a table. The shadow looks shaky--wispy and shifting--because it is made of many thin twigs and long thorns which permit light to mix with the shadow. The thorn tree, I would argue, is an icon of colonialism. In Nairobi there is still a restaurant called The Thorn Tree popular among white and wealthy Kenyans and tourists. The outdoor part of the restaurant is built around a huge thorn tree.

with petals in basins and being mistress of her fleet of ships (106). These "treasures" she has "laid apart" (105) are inflected with lesbianism. They support her very like the dreams of kissing Alice do in the drafts. The swallow dips her wing in pools. The tiger, while terrifying, is also sensual when Rhoda compares it's "leap" to "[t]ongues with their whips . . . upon me" (106).

In memories of the party, as in the original experience of it, Rhoda speaks of colonized places where Jinny speaks of sex. For Jinny, the party is an event full of glitter and flirtatious socializing. She recalls, "Rhoda and I, exposed in bright dresses, with a few precious stones nestling on a cold ring round our throats, bowed, shook hands and took a sandwich from a plate with a smile." Rhoda's corresponding soliloquy gives images evocative of darkness, migration, and colonialism. She says, "[t]he tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world" (126).

Later, Jinny again recalls the party excitedly: "he comes; he crosses the room to where I sit . . . . Our hands touch, our bodies burst into fire" (140). Rhoda describes what she sees in the eyes of her titillated friends, including Jinny, by evoking wild animals and the men with assegais: "horns and trumpets . . . ring out. Leaves unfold; the stag blares in the thicket. There is a dancing and a drumming, like the dancing and drumming of naked men with assegais" (140).

What I want to emphasize here is that Rhoda's thoughts of tigers, waves/warriors, ships carrying white petals to islands where parrots chatter, a swallow dipping her wing in a dark pool, and thorn trees in the desert are evocations of the sodadic zone, its people and its animals. Woolf juxtaposes references to these figures in Rhoda's soliloquies with explicit, aggressively heterosexual references in Jinny's soliloquies. In addition, each time the party is referred to, Jinny's soliloquy precedes Rhoda's. In this way, the structure of the novel puts Rhoda's references to colonized places literally in the shadow of Jinny's aggressive heterosexuality. Placing the two of them together at these parties also aligns Rhoda's lesbianism to Jinny's sexuality, which, if heterosexual, is non-reproductive and

also primitivized by her description of a sexual encounter as animalistic: she says she hears the "crash and rending of boughs and the crack of antlers as if the beasts of the forest were all hunting" and that "[o]ne has pierced me. One is driven deep within me" (177).<sup>21</sup>

Other characters' soliloquies about eros or sensuality are also juxtaposed with Rhoda's references to colony. The whole section of soliloquies at Percival's farewell is highly charged sexually, each character's sexuality often the subject of either her own or another's reflection. In one series of six brief soliloquies, one after another, all but one character--Neville--speaks a sexual or sensual memory. Jinny and Louis think of the scene in which Jinny bursts in on Louis masturbating and kisses him.<sup>22</sup> Bernard remembers water from Mrs. Constable's sponge sluicing down his body as the moment when "we became clothed in this changing, this feeling garment of flesh." Susan remembers that "the boot boy made love to the scullery-maid in the kitchen garden, among the blown-out washing." Rhoda's recollection is also of the scullery-maid and the boot boy, but her memory exposes a clear link between sexuality and a colonial image. For her, "[t]he breath of the wind was like a tiger panting" (124). This tiger is a place-marker for the sexuality between the boot boy and the maid. Nor is Rhoda merely expressing fear of the heterosexual kiss in terms of a fearsome creature, a tiger. Her response to the kiss, given in terms of her comment about the wind and the tiger, is hot and excited. The wind, while it is compared to a tiger's panting, is merely a "breath." The "panting" of the tiger is at least as suggestive of excited panting as it is of anything threatening, especially since Woolf chose panting instead of a more unequivocally fearsome word such as leaping, clawing.

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<sup>21</sup> It is significant that Woolf puts Jinny, in particular, at this party with Rhoda. Rhoda's lesbianism wouldn't stand in such sharp contrast to the maternal and paternal heterosexualities of Susan or Bernard. The presence of Louis would have encouraged readers to understand Rhoda as heterosexual, as the two of them are lovers for part of the novel.

<sup>22</sup> The original kiss is on pages 11-13. The suggestion that Louis is masturbating is in his lines, "I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk," and "My body is a stalk. I press the stalk. A drop oozes from the hole at the mouth and slowly, thickly, grows larger and larger."

growling, hissing. In addition, this is the same tiger that just prior is compared to "tongues with their whips upon me" (106). Even to the degree Rhoda is expressing fear as well as excitement, here, again, she is making metaphors for sex out of a tiger—a reference evocative of a colonial space and savage, animalistic energy.

Significantly, the only character whose memory on this page is not of sex or sensuality is the other homosexual character, Neville. Though he does speak directly of sexuality elsewhere, here, where his friends have erotic memories, his soliloquy is about death. He recalls the moment when he heard of "the man [who] lay livid with his throat cut in the gutter" (124). His reference to death and a corpse in the gutter where others talk of sex is another example of Woolf's expression of homosexuality in terms of degeneracy, evoked by both death and gutter.

More references to physicality, sensuality and potentially erotic intimacy are scattered throughout the section of soliloquies about the characters' first reunion. Bernard tells us that he is engaged to be married, and that Percival loves Susan (118, 123). Susan describes her desire as passion for maternity: "I shall be debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity" (132). In addition to her remarks about the party, Jinny notices of all her friends that, "[b]eauty rides our brow" and then points to her beauty and Susan's in particular: "There is mine, there is Susan's. Our flesh is firm and cool" (141). Louis describes the language of the others as speaking "a little language such as lovers use" and says that "[a]n imperious brute possesses them. The nerves thrill in their thighs. Their hearts pound and churn in their sides" (143). Neville arrives early at the restaurant to extend both his agony and his pleasure over the anticipation of Percival's arrival (118-122). And after Percival arrives, Neville describes his meal sensuously: "delicious mouthfuls of roast duck, fitly piled with vegetables, following each other in exquisite rotation of warmth, weight, sweet and bitter, past my palate, down my gullet, into my stomach, have stabilized my body" (138). His description of eating and food segues into a more overtly sexual description of nerves trembling in the roof of his mouth

and of sensation spreading into a cavern overlooking what he calls the "mill-race" of his unnamed passion (138).<sup>23</sup> He also imagines an intimate scene with Percival which mirrors his anguished wait at the restaurant: "his slippers. . . . And his voice downstairs in the hall? And catching sight of him when he does not see one? . . . . He is with some one else. He is faithless, his love meant nothing. . . . And then the door opens. He is here" (139-40).

In the midst of all this sensuality, Rhoda's sexuality is identified--if not named--as lesbian, and at the same time is explicitly compared to her constant looking into a colonial distance. Neville identifies Rhoda as a lesbian by imagining she will help him name his homosexuality. During the dinner, Neville describes his violent feelings for Percival as "these roaring waters" and a "mill-race that foams beneath" "our crazy platforms" of identity. And, when trying to discover "[b]y what particular name are we to call" those feelings, he proposes to "let Rhoda speak, whose face I see reflected mistily in the looking-glass opposite" (138). Neville's belief that Rhoda will help him name his love, and his vision of her in the looking glass opposite both reveal that Neville and Rhoda have homosexuality in common.<sup>24</sup>

Neville cannot, however, "let Rhoda speak" the name of his love as he proposes to do. As if explaining to himself why he can't imagine Rhoda finding a name, he replaces love, for Rhoda, with looking into the distance beyond India. He says, "[I]ove is not a whirlpool to her [as it is to him]. She is not giddy when she looks down. She looks far away over our heads, beyond India" (138-9). Through syntax, here, Woolf makes Neville's male homoerotic love different from, but parallel to Rhoda's looking into the

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<sup>23</sup> Drowning in the mill-race for forbidden love is also the theme of Ibsen's play Rosmersholm.

<sup>24</sup> Her face reflected in the mirror also has echoes of Rhoda's constant inability, through the novel, to see her own face. She insists that, unlike other girls, she has no face (43). This facelessness is one of the characteristics that Oxindine argues marks Rhoda as a lesbian in the final version of The Waves.

distance beyond India.

Rhoda's soliloquy follows immediately. She seems to respond to Neville directly, beginning with "yes," as if to agree that love is not a whirlpool to her, but is, instead, looking over her friends' heads to India. She also makes reference to the distance into which she looks, to whiteness in a dark place, and to the dreaming that, in the drafts of The Waves, is specifically lesbian-sexual dreaming. She says.

Yes, between your shoulders, over your heads, to a landscape, . . . to a hollow where the many-backed steep hills come down like birds' wings folded. There, on the short firm turf, are bushes, dark leaved, and against their darkness I see a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive. But it is not you, it is not you, it is not you: not Percival, Susan, Jinny, Neville, or Louis. When the white arm rests upon the knee it is a triangle: now it is upright--a column; now a fountain, falling. . . . Behind it roars the sea. It is beyond our reach. Yet there I venture. There I go to replenish my emptiness, to stretch my nights and fill them fuller and fuller with dreams. (139)

Here, Rhoda puts herself amidst darkness and columns specifically in order to replenish those dreams that are the strongest marker of Rhoda's lesbianism in the drafts: her desire to "stretch her nights" and fill them "fuller with dreams" echoes her comments in the drafts about how dreams of Alice fill her nights (H123).

In another soliloquy, Susan places Jinny's heterosexual posing alongside, and in opposition to, the distance into which Rhoda looks throughout the novel. Susan says, "something has formed at school . . . not Rhoda's strange communications when she looks past us, over our shoulders; nor Jinny's pirouetting, all of a piece, limbs and body" (98). This distance into which Rhoda looks here is not specifically colonial. It is, however, a distance often described elsewhere as containing tigers and swallows, sometimes India and Africa, and sometimes columns and hills. In this novel of repetition and echo, mention of

waves also invokes warriors, and mention of warriors also invokes waves whether or not both are made explicitly present in any given scene. Similarly, each time a character refers to Rhoda's "distance," Africa and India and columns and hills are also invoked by echo.

In yet another soliloquy, Rhoda imagines darkness, drumming, and Turks when she sees her friends in sexual interactions. After their second reunion, the six characters walk in three heterosexual couples who all make reference to sex or love. Bernard goes off with Susan "who has always loved [him]." Neville takes Jinny's hand and the two of them say "love, love" to each other (229). Louis says, of Rhoda, "[w]e have sacrificed the embrace among the ferns, and love, love, love by the lake, standing, like conspirators who have drawn apart to share some secret, by the urn" (233). As the others talk of sex or love, Rhoda watches her friends in pairs and sees "darkness clos[e] over their bodies" (230). She also hears "drumming on the roofs of a fasting city when the Turks are hungry and uncertain tempered." Furthermore, the sounds of Turks change into the sound of a bride eager for sex. Rhoda hears Turks "crying with sharp, stag-like barks, 'Open, open.'" A few lines later, the sound is a bride who has "let her silken nightdress fall and come to the doorway saying, 'Open, open'" (230).

Rhoda also fantasizes the freeing of her lesbian sexual desire as something she will do in a colonial place. Walking on an embankment with her withered violets for Percival, she sees "ships that sail to India" and says immediately afterward:

I will walk by the river. . . . I will pace this terrace and watch the ships  
bowling down the tide. A woman walks on deck. . . . Her skirts are  
blown; her hair is blown; they are going out to sea; they are leaving us; they  
are vanishing this summer evening. Now I will relinquish; now I will let  
loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked back desire to be  
spent, to be consumed. We will gallop together over desert hills where the  
swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the  
wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to

the uttermost corners of the earth I throw my violets, my offering to Percival. (164)

In this passage, Rhoda sees a woman with whom she fantasizes letting loose her previously "checked" desire. The woman's blowing skirts and hair add to the sexual importance of the scene, since they hearken back to the kiss the children saw amidst the blowing laundry. But the sexuality of the scene is at first intertwined with references to colony and perhaps Greece, and finally expressed entirely in terms of what Rhoda will do in a colonial place. Even before Rhoda sees the woman, she sees the ship bound for India. Once the ship departs for India, "now" Rhoda can begin to loose her desire. When Rhoda actually gets to describing the fantasy, it is only very obliquely, if at all, spoken in terms of sex. Instead, it is very specifically about being and doing in the colonial/sotadic place Rhoda has been describing in dreams and fantasies from the beginning of the novel: they will ride in the desert where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and where the pillars are. Rhoda also imagines herself following the woman's ship on the backs of waves (warriors) which fling white foam (elsewhere identified unambiguously as Rhoda herself) to uttermost corners of the earth (107).

Rhoda is also the character most closely aligned with the warriors/waves, often fearing them, sometimes amidst the waves, sometimes the waves themselves. As a child having a nightmare, she longs to wake from dreaming, to "pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing" (28). The people pursuing are, of course, those same figures described in the interludes as men with assegais, and also described as tigers at the party. Rhoda's dreams in the draft are of kissing Alice, and thoughts of those dreams help her hold up during the day; it is no coincidence that Rhoda's dreams in the final version are nightmares involving drowning amidst waves/warriors/tigers.

Later, when she is coming home from school, Rhoda blends the tiger and the

waves in her imagination, and then attaches herself to them as well as to wildness. She says, "[s]o I detach the summer term. With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses" (64). And during what is probably Rhoda's suicide, she pictures Africa (as Sappho leaping from her cliff might have seen the North African coast), hears drumming, and describes herself as white petals being darkened with sea water. Riding a mule in Spain, she says, "[t]he ridge of the hill rises like mist, but from the top I shall see Africa." And then,

We launch now out over the precipice. Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet. The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. . . . We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. (206)

Toward the end of the novel, Louis says Rhoda has gone "like the desert heat." And Rhoda exclaims how she has hated humanity--that they have stained and corrupted her. She says this, however, from the perspective of refuge, as if she is regretful about what has been. Her relief seems to come equally from being separate from humanity on a mountain, but also from being able to see Africa. She reflects on how hideous humanity has been "[n]ow as I climb this mountain, from the top of which I shall see Africa" (203).

In a few passages Rhoda is closely aligned with the purulence--the oozing snail and the festering worm--of the interludes and at the same time to images of colonialism. She is described as having eyes "the color of snail's flesh" (200) by Louis, who also says he thinks of her "when the dry leaves patter to the ground; when the old men come with pointed sticks and pierce little bits of paper as we pierced her" (203). Additionally, in his summation, Bernard suggests the children who pierced Rhoda and the birds who pecked the snail are one when he describes the "tap tap tap of the remorseless beaks of the young" (288). This makes a link between Rhoda and India/Africa, as well. A worm that is pecked

in the interludes becomes a hooded cobra in one of Bernard's stories. He imagines, "the birds pick at a worm--that is a hooded cobra--and leave it with a festering brown scar to be mauled by lions" (23). Reference to cobras and lions evokes both India and Africa and, by alliance, places Rhoda there, pecked and left to fester.

A description of Rhoda in Bernard's summary also aligns her with corruption as well as with colonial places. He says of her that "[t]he willow as she saw it grew on the verge of a grey desert where no bird sang. The leaves shrivelled as she looked at them. . . . Perhaps one pillar, sunlit, stood in her desert by a pool where wild beasts come down stealthily to drink" (252).

There is also a parallel between Bernard's image of sexual love and Rhoda's image of rot and blackness. Mourning Percival's death, Bernard walks into a picture gallery to avoid being drawn back into daily life--what he calls "the sequence of things" (155). He is grateful to see pictures that stop the flood of images, in his mind's eye, of Percival's death. In his search for "something unvisual" he says, "[h]ere are gardens: and Venus among her flowers. . . . [These pictures] expand my consciousness of him and bring him back to me differently. I remember his beauty. 'Look, where he comes.' I said" (156). Following Bernard's soliloquy is one of Rhoda's. She too mourns Percival: she too walks in the street: she too considers going into a museum: she too entwines her memory of Percival (her tribute to him) with flowers. But where Bernard sees Venus--love--among flowers and remembers Percival, Rhoda sees "oaks cracked asunder and red where the flowering branch has fallen:" and she picks violets to offer as a tribute that by the end of her soliloquy are "withered violets, blackened violets" (159, 161). The parallel between Bernard's and Rhoda's responses to Percival's death emphasizes this contrast between Bernard's thoughts of Venus among her flowers and Rhoda's thoughts of blackened and withered violets. This parallel is part of the general pattern of Rhoda's reference to darkness and degeneracy where others mention sex (reference to Venus is certainly a reference to sexual love). As Woolf stains and corrupts the pages of Shakespeare's homoerotic sonnets with

decaying flowers, Rhoda's tribute to Percival is worship mingled ambiguously with corruption.

No one of the instances of Rhoda's sexual/lesbian connection with darkness or corruption is very striking. It is the mass of connections, the accumulation of juxtapositions that draws my attention and suggests that there is something significant in Woolf's linkage between Rhoda, in whom lesbianism is repressed, her responses to sexuality, and her references to colony, blackness, tigers, cobras, India, Turks, drumming, warriors, assegais. If juxtaposition is significant anywhere, it is in Woolf's The Waves where relatively passive juxtaposition rather than overt, active interaction of people or ideas makes the meanings. It isn't that Woolf is making a claim that lesbian sexuality is equal to primitivized images; but the number and frequency of primitivized references to blackness, savagery, tigers, islands with creepers all build up an impression left on the mind, like the film left on the bottle that Woolf uses as a metaphor to describe the action of the waves racing down the sand and back to the sea, leaving foam and bits of black in their path down the sand.

#### Four: Race, Class and Sex in the Work of Sylvia Townsend Warner

As is Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner is a British novelist who writes about imperialism and lesbian erotics. Warner's evocations of both, however, are much more direct than Woolf's. Also unlike Woolf, Warner is persistently absent from literary histories. For all twenty-one years of the halting revival of her work, beginning with the 1978 Women's Press of London reprint of her first novel, Lolly Willowes (1926) (Marcus, "STW" 531), critics writing about Warner have repeatedly had to explain who she was, catalog her many accomplishments, and exclaim over her absence from literary history. In 1985, Eleanor Perenyi noted that Warner's obituary read like "a passport to respectable oblivion" (27). In 1990, Gillian Spraggs claimed Warner as "arguably one of the most neglected twentieth-century English writers of stature" (110). And in 1999, "Sylvia Who?" is the most common question I get asked about her.<sup>1</sup>

Warner's anonymity persists despite her incredible productivity, the generally positive reception each work received when it appeared, and the continuing devotion of loyal readers. In her long lifetime (1893-1978), Warner published seven novels, six collections of poetry, and thirteen collections of short stories, many of which were first published in the New Yorker. Her first two novels, Lolly Willowes and Mr. Fortune's Maggot (1927), were nominated for prizes and selected book-of-the-month by American book clubs (Harman 66, 71).<sup>2</sup> Among contemporary Warner readers, according to

<sup>1</sup> For other references to Warner's persistent neglect, see Clare Harman's "Sylvia Townsend Warner 1893-1978: A Celebration," J. Lawrence Mitchell's "The Secret Country of Her Mind," Eleanor Perenyi's "The Good Witch of the West," Robert Caserio's "Celibate Sisters-in-Revolution," Barbara Brothers' "Writing Against the Grain," Janet Montefiore's "Listening to Minna," Arnold Rattenbury's "Literature, Lying and the Sober Truth," Simon Watney's "Who Is Sylvia?" Jane Marcus's "Alibis and Legends: The Ethics of Elsewhere, Gender and Estrangement" and "Bluebeard's Daughters: Pretexts for Pre-Texts," Terry Castle's The Apparitional Lesbian, and Maroula Joannou's "Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1930s."

<sup>2</sup> Lolly Willows was nominated for the Prix Femina, and Mr. Fortune for the James Tait Black prize. Collections of poetry published during Warner's life include: The Espalier (1925), Time Importuned (1928), Opus 7 (1931), Whether a Dove or Seagull (1933) which is a joint collection with Valentine Ackland, Boxwood (1957), King Duffus and Other Poems (1968). Some of the collections are small, and with small presses, such as

Maroula Joannou, "it is axiomatic that she is among the most accomplished and versatile of early twentieth-century English writers" (89).

Many of these readers have sought to rewrite Warner into histories from which she has been excluded. She has often been left out of discussions about the Communist Party, left politics, and the Spanish Civil War because she was a woman, but Wendy Mulford, Barbara Brothers, Arnold Rattenbury, Jan Montefiore, Thomas Foster, Simon Watney and Maroula Joannou have worked at redressing this problem. She is not included in the Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, Gilbert and Gubar's No Man's Land, or Lilian Faderman's Chloe Plus Olivia, but she is included in Bonnie Kime Scott's The Gender of Modernism, and she has been the subject of essays by critics who put her feminism and/or her lesbianism at the center of her writing, including Jane Marcus, Terry Castle, Thomas Foster, Gillian Spraggs, Robert Caserio, and Gay Wachman. Other critics have deemphasized her politics to celebrate her literariness. William Maxwell, Clare Harman, and Eleanor Perenyi celebrate Warner's artistry for its beauty, passion, humor, and rich

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the pamphlet King Duffus and other Poems. But most are published by Viking or Chatto and Windus. The New Yorker published over 140 stories and 9 poems by Warner between 1936 and 1976, close to a record according to William Maxwell, one of Warner's editors at the magazine (Maxwell "Introduction" xv, "Sylvia Townsend Warner and The New Yorker" 44). Volumes of stories published during her lifetime include Some World Far from Ours (1929), Elinor Barley (1930), A Moral Ending and Other Stories (1931), The Salutation and Other Stories (1932), More Joy in Heaven (1935), The Cat's Cradle Book (1940), A Garland of Straw (1943), The Museum of Cheats (1947), Winter in the Air (1955), A Spirit Rises (1962), A Stranger With a Bag (published in the U.S. as Swans on an Autumn River) (1966), The Innocent and the Guilty (1971) and Kingdoms of Elfin (1977). Novels published during her lifetime include Lolly Willowes (1926), Mr. Fortune's Maggot (1927), The True Heart (1929), Summer Will Show (1936), After the Death of Don Juan (1938), The Corner that Held Them (1948), and The Flint Anchor (1954). Warner also translated Proust's Contre Sainte-Beuve (By Way of Sainte-Beuve (1958) and Jean-René Huguenin's La Côte Sauvage (A Place of Shipwreck) (1962), wrote a biography of T.H. White (1967), contributed numerous articles to journals including New Masses, Left Review, The Nation, Time and Tide, Life and Letters Today, Daily Worker, Left News, The Countryman, Our Time, and The Country Standard. Posthumous publications of Warner's work include three more collections of poetry: Arazel and Other Poems (1978) Twelve Poems (1980), and Collected Poems (1982); three of stories: Scenes of Childhood and Other Stories (1981), One Thing Leading to Another and Other Stories (1984), and Selected Stories of Sylvia Townsend Warner (1988); The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner (1994); Letters (1982); and I'll Stand By You: Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland (1998).

literary allusiveness.

Two biographers have also sought to revive Warner studies. Wendy Mulford's *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters and Politics, 1930-1951* is excellent though limited by the fact that Mulford didn't have access to all of Warner's papers. Clare Harman's more recent *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* addresses the long span of Warner's life, but de-emphasizes her political activism.

Warner's absence from literary history is partly the result of her left-wing politics, her gender, and her lesbianism. Warner herself thought that her "political commitments" to the Communist Party had affected her reception "very badly." In a 1975 interview, she said she "usually had two or three amazingly good reviews" but never "reviews from the sort of reviewers that sell books" ("STW in Conversation" 36). As Simon Watney sums it up, Warner was "intensely literary, a far leftist, an intellectual to her fingertips, a woman and a lesbian." This combination is "hardly . . . likely to ensure her reputation in modern Britain" (56).

Warner also seems to have lived the wrong kind of life to have been embraced by scholars of British modernism, left history or feminist politics. She lived in London in the 1920s, was friends with Bloomsbury's David Garnett and Steven Tomlin, once had lunch with Virginia Woolf, and later became friends with Leonard Woolf.<sup>3</sup> But after the mid-1930s, Warner lived rurally and wrote about rural people while modernism is often defined as exploration of urban lives and mechanization. Her communist organizing was also among rural agricultural workers rather than factory workers.<sup>4</sup> And though Warner was a

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<sup>3</sup> Rattenbury writes that "Sylvia kept a deliberate distance from literary gangs, but was widely recognized for all that. How else could she have conducted those great round robin collections and exhortations during the Spanish Civil War? Why else would the royal society of arts invite her to lecture, or Penguin include her so early in their fiction list" ("Literature, Lying and the Sober Truth" 234).

<sup>4</sup> Joannou writes that "[t]he revolutionary rhetoric of the Internationale made much of the insurrectionary potential of the peasantry but in the 1930s the Communist Party prided itself on deriving its support from workers in the large industrial cities. Sylvia's public

feminist and a lesbian, neither feminism nor sexuality were the principles around which she organized her political activism or her writing.

The last paradox of Warner's neglect is that it is exacerbated by an incredible diversity that makes her writing impossible to categorize.<sup>5</sup> Her work includes both realistic and fantastic fiction, involving talking cats, elves, and witches,<sup>6</sup> as well as historical realism. Even the most realistic work, Summer Will Show, has buried references to Cinderella and witchery that contribute a great deal of ironic humor to an also serious and political book. Her work is full of modernist experimentation, but isn't described by any characterization of modernism I have ever seen. Rather, Warner experiments with realism itself. For instance, her novels After the Death of Don Juan (1938), The Corner that Held Them (1948) and The Flint Anchor (1954) involve many characters in realistic and historical settings, but Warner denies the reader easy identification with any one central consciousness. Stylistically, Warner is compared to Virginia Woolf AND to Jane Austen, sometimes in the same essay.<sup>7</sup> If her poetry is experimental in some ways, formally it is traditional.

For all these reasons, though, a full scale revival of Warner's works--getting them all back into print, into libraries, and onto syllabi--is crucial. Analysis of her and Ackland's contributions in Spain and her work for the Communist Party would go far toward clarifying women's participation in left-wing political movements of the 1930s and 40s. Her long and fairly public sexual partnership with Valentine Ackland, who wore

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opposition to rural squalor was a salutary reminder to many socialists that poverty and deprivation were not exclusively urban phenomena" (93).

<sup>5</sup> Perenyi also addresses the diversity and quantity of Warner's production as factors contributing to her neglect.

<sup>6</sup> See especially the later stories collected in The Cat's Cradle Book and Kingdoms of Elfin as well as Lolly Willowes.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Jane Marcus's essay "A Wilderness of One's Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner" and Thomas Foster's "Dream Made Flesh."

pants when and where it was not common for women to do so, as well as Warner's friendships with gay men, makes her central to lesbian and gay history of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Her private theorizing about sexuality and gender—she called her relationship a marriage, asserted the masculinity of her mind, analyzed sexological studies—and her stories involving incestuous, interspecies, and intergenerational as well as homoerotic love, demand that Warner be written into the history of contemporary queer theory, a field too

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<sup>8</sup> Warner and Ackland lived together for 38 years from 1930 until 1968 when Ackland died of breast cancer. They referred to January 12, 1931 as their wedding night and kept January 12 as an anniversary. See *Diaries* 337, 339. Warner delighted in characterizing the two as an "old married couple" and their pleasure in living together as "wedded bliss" or "wedded lives" or "a long happy marriage." See *Diaries* 337, 340, 350, 357 for instance. After Valentine died, Warner began to live in what she called her "widowed estate" and "widowhood." See, for instance, *Diaries* 332, 340, 345. See also Wendy Mulford's *This Narrow Place*, which describes their lives together, Valentine Ackland's posthumously published *For Sylvia* (1986), the collection of love letters between Warner and Ackland, *I'll Stand By You* (1998), which also includes narrative passages Warner wrote as she edited the letters for publication.

Warner's delight in calling her relationship a marriage has to be contrasted with her hostility to patriarchal marriage as an institution. Husbands and wives in general who act out conventionally-gendered domestic roles are lambasted in a letter to Nancy Cunard in which Warner describes her work arranging housing for evacuees from London during World War II. She writes,

Dorchester is crammed with evacuees. . . . I spend miserable mornings going from one billet to another, always hearing the same complaints, the same incessant preoccupations with pillow-cases and tea-cups. My heart is entirely with the Londoners, yet if their billets are to be even tolerable to them I have to placate their blasted hostesses; and anyway the hostesses are as much to be pitied, for they are all bred and born slaves . . . with noses never raised from the floor polish, and husbands who don't like to be put out. (Letter to Nancy Cunard 7/17/44)

And in another letter to Nancy Cunard, Warner rages about governmental privileges that accrue to women simply for having husbands, and argues that the sexism that prompts this privilege must be resolved before other kinds of injustice can be addressed adequately:

Now I have a notice on my table telling me to attend at the Labour Exchange with a view to taking up employment of national importance—which means they will try to put me into a laundry. If I had taken to myself a husband, lived on him and made his life a misery (as undoubtedly I should have done, as no man has ever been able to bear me as a continuity) I should not be troubled with any of this. Being kept by a husband is of national importance enough. But to be feme sole [sic], and self supporting, that hands you over, no more claim to individual choice than a biscuit. This great civil war, Nancy, that will come and must come before the world can begin to grow up, will be fought out on this terrain of man and woman, and we must storm and hold Cape Turk before we talk of social justice. (*Letters* 84)

often imagined as not having a history involving women intellectuals who lived and worked rurally, theorized about sexuality, and had a good time in bed sixty years ago. Her lecture about women writers during which she refers back to Virginia Woolf's lectures published as A Room of One's Own, as well as her own comments about women in society in letters to Nancy Cunard, among others, locates her firmly in the history of feminism. For feminist activists and scholars, she raises questions about how a genteel daughter of a master at a famous English boys' school--the kind satirized in The Waves--became a communist activist constantly aware of her class. Her modernist experimentation with fantasy, realism, and her use of history in fiction will necessarily shift accounts of modernism. Not the least, a new Warner studies would emphasize how much humor and passion there is in Warner's work, as well as the sheer fun of reading her.

My focus, here, is the inextricable blend, for Warner, of rage, political activism, love and pleasure. Warner sharply distinguishes love that is connected to activism from romanticized, primitivizing love. Rather, romanticization and primitivism are some of the things Warner rages against, her critique taking the form of antagonism toward middle-class ardor for a "picturesque" working-class--a naive romanticization of working-class lives.

But despite the fact that Warner is overtly critical of one version of primitivism, she also relies on primitivism in her fiction. Her stories of elves and cats, for instance, have an ethnographic tone. Her love of Spain and wild animals certainly romanticizes both. And she relies on primitivism when she represents homoerotics: she figures homosexuality always in terms of white middle-class contact with members of the working class or people of color. This is connected to the way in which sensuous love, rage, and political activism against oppression are enmeshed for Warner; but it also follows the pattern set by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, John Addington Symonds, Sigmund Freud and Bronislaw Malinowski, among others, who each sought to take the measure of middle-class British homosexuality by writing comparative sexology.

The paradox of Warner's work is that the same qualities that make it compelling--the righteous political rage, compelling political philosophy, and passionate love that simultaneously underpin her writing--are also the qualities that make it of a kind with modernist primitivism, including its reliance on primitivist representations of people of color and the working class. In this chapter, I focus on the complex and contradictory ways in which Warner treats primitivizing representations in many of her writings. This will provide a context that will help illuminate the ways that primitivism works in Warner's neglected and dismissed novel Summer Will Show, which is the subject of the next chapter.

### **Rage, Love, Politics**

Warner's letters and diaries make it abundantly clear that she was a woman who raged over private and public injustice, from abuses of the working class to fascism in Spain. Rage motivates Warner's local and global political activism: it impassions her journalism; and it seethes quietly, nearly always blended with humor, in her fiction. Nor did Warner's rage disappear with age. When she was sixty-eight years old, she wrote to George Plank that she

go[es] on being angry to this day, frantically unavailingly angry at such things as fox-hunters, otter-hunters, Valentine's vampire relations--and often the demands made on her by her vampire church. The best I can say for myself is that now I am more often saddened than infuriated. But I could not be my mother's daughter without containing a considerable charge of dynamite. (Letters 192)

But if Warner raged through her life, her letters and diaries also make it clear that her rage was accompanied by equally passionate love and pleasure. If she rages at fox hunters, it is because she loves foxes--because she feels "an assignation with the fox" and

all hunted creatures.<sup>9</sup> In 1958 she wrote, also to George Plank, that she had "appeased a life-long ambition" when she

held a young fox in [her] arms. He was an orphan--in other words, the vixen had been killed--a small rickety orphan when he was given to Mrs Cox six months ago. . . . I held him in my arms, & snuffed his wild geranium smell, and suddenly he thrust his long nose under my chin, and burrowed against my shoulder, and subsided into bliss. His paws are . . . soft as raspberries. (Letters 169)

This letter to Plank shows how Warner felt about wild and domestic animals; this kind of sensuous affection pervades her letters, diaries and fiction. But the letter to Plank also shows how love, rage and pleasure are, for Warner, equally bound up with political activism. The letter is about the sensory pleasure of holding the fox, and Warner seeks to recreate that pleasure for her reader. But Warner's reiteration of the fact that the fox is an orphan (she says it three times, in effect, in one paragraph) connects this letter to Warner's many other references to foxes in which she takes fox-hunting as an emblem of the class structure she works to dismantle as a Communist Party organizer. In a 1940 letter to Paul Nordoff, for instance, Warner begins with a description of a beautiful dawn in which bombs fall harmlessly in a field. And she continues, sounding very like Virginia Woolf in Three Guineas:

so perish all warlike heroism: for it is undoubtedly heroic to go out on bombing raids, it is even more dangerous than going out on a horse to kill foxes. If more deeds of heroism could just fall flat there would be more hope for humanity. (69)

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<sup>9</sup> Warner's protagonist Sophia, in Summer Will Show, quits a hunting party because she feels "an assignation with the fox" rather than an alliance with the other fox hunters, though she is of their class. See chapter five for more about Summer Will Show. See Gay Wachman's "Crosswriting the Empire" and "Lady into Fox, Fox into Lady" for detailed analyses of the figure of the fox in the novel.

Warner does not share Woolf's pacifism, but Warner's comparison of fox hunting, military heroism, and upper-class patriarchal sporting rites is very like Woolf's comparison of bombed Spanish towns with the uniforms and ceremonies that celebrate men of rank in patriarchal institutions from law courts to universities to the military. Just as Woolf's juxtaposition links the destruction and death of war with patriarchal hierarchies that have little, overtly, to do with war. Warner's comparison of those who go fox hunting with those who go on bombing raids suggests that the false-heroics of the former lead to the destructive heroics of the latter. Also, the blissful wildness of the fox, and her sensual pleasure in holding him, is somehow the antithesis, for Warner, of the political system she despises.

Warner's relationship with Valentine Ackland also shows that if, for Warner, rage is inextricable from love, both erotics and political action are also inextricable parts of the mix. One of the first things Warner and Ackland did together in 1930, a prelude to their becoming lovers, was to challenge a woman many Chaldon<sup>10</sup> residents believed was abusing mentally retarded girls who were in the woman's charge.<sup>11</sup> Warner's account of the events in her diary shows that she finds Ackland seductive specifically for the strength and purity of her rage, and that Warner finds enraged political action with Valentine erotic. Part of the erotic charge of the journal entry is, no doubt, attributable to the fact that it recounts events leading up to the night the two went to bed together for the first time. But I think it also likely that they went to bed together on that night partly because of the erotic charge, for Warner at least, of the combination of rage and political action against

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<sup>10</sup> Warner had just bought Miss Green's cottage in Chaldon. She and Valentine had been fixing up the house, and Valentine was to live there as caretaker.

<sup>11</sup> Miss Stevenson, the lady of the local Vicarage, was charged with training the girls for domestic service, but the fact that the girls often ran away led many in Chaldon to believe she was abusing them. For detail about Warner's and Ackland's challenge, which led to a libel suit against them and a few others who challenged Miss Stevenson, see Warner's Diaries, 69 and 69n; I'll Stand By You, 10-11, 123; Clare Harman's Sylvia Townsend Warner 99, 137, 139; and Wendy Mulford's This Narrow Place 39-40.

oppression and abuse. Indeed, Warner describes the action she and Valentine took against the abuse of the girls as if rage and action were preludes to sex. She emphasizes that she and Ackland acted spontaneously on hearing that a girl had run away. Immediately they "were on [their] feet" (69). She reports that when they make a first visit to the Vicarage to inspect for dogs, she watched Ackland and "admir[ed] her legs." and that she and Ackland were "firm and sinister" toward a woman at the Vicarage who was trying to get them to state the purpose of their visit. Warner also praises Ackland's rage for being more severe than her own: the woman got "little [sympathy] from me, and nothing from Valentine, who sat white and motionless like Justice" while the woman tried to defend herself. She describes Ackland shaking her stick like a squire, and calls Valentine's "righteous indignation" a "beautiful thing." Later, and provocatively, she reports that "lying exhausted on the rug" she watched Ackland's rage "flame in her with severe geometrical flames" (69).

The diary entry ends with Warner's report of how she and Ackland ended up in bed together: talk of the Vicarage through the wall, both of them in their own bedrooms, leads to talk of love. She writes "[h]ow the Vicarage led to love I have forgotten" but immediately remembers "(oh, it was an eiderdown)." Talk of love, and Valentine's wail that she was "utterly loveless" sends Warner through the door and into Valentine's bed where, she says, she "found love." The emphasis throughout the entry on Ackland's political rage and severity in what is, finally, a seductive narrative about how she and Valentine became lovers, suggests that the actions against the abuse of the girls was important as a prelude to the sex. The very organization of the entry, with its description of what went on at the Vicarage leading up to the description of how Warner got into Ackland's bed, also clarifies the connection between the political rage and Warner's erotics.

Similarly, Warner's more organized political activism as a local leader of the Communist party, against fascism, and for the government forces in the Spanish Civil War are marked by both passionate rage and passionate love. Warner and Ackland joined the

Communist party in 1935 and worked as local leaders organizing among the rural workers in Dorset.<sup>12</sup> Warner's activism was motivated by rage at the landowning class for its part in creating the despicable living conditions of the working class in rural Dorset. She was convinced that those conditions could be remedied only when the British working classes, rural and urban, made alliances with each other and with "their fellows in other countries, and other continents" ("The Way" 486). Warner and Ackland were also aggressive fund raisers for the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War, went to Barcelona with a Red Cross unit in 1936, and visited Valencia and Madrid with the Second International Congress for Writers in Defence of Culture in 1937. At the Third American Writers Congress in New York in 1939, she condemned fascism with characteristic contempt: it is "as deadly to those it would cherish as to those it would destroy. . . . teaches race hatred to children. . . . says to women, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the battlefield," and "drives out its artists and thinkers" ("Review and Comment" 22).

But Warner also describes her activism for communism and for Spain in terms of sensuous love. She wrote to Elizabeth Wade White of the first trip to Spain, "I don't think I have ever met so many congenial people in the whole of my life, liking overleapt any little bounds of language." Her comments about Barcelona specifically reveal both her love for that city and for what she knew of the communist USSR:

Barcelona, by the time we saw it, was I suppose the nearest thing I shall ever see to the early days of the USSR . . . the very first days, when everything was proceeding on the impulse of that first leap into life. After the military rising, . . . after a couple of days fighting, Barcelona was taken over by committees of trades union men, and the workers' militia; in other words, it is a Soviet town. (Letters 41) [first ellipsis in Maxwell's edition of the letters]

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<sup>12</sup> Warner never gave up her membership, though Ackland did in 1953, and encouraged Warner to do the same. See Wendy Mulford's This Narrow Place 58-60.

In 1936, she wrote to Jean Starr Untermeyer that "[a]t first meeting we liked the Catalans, and that liking turned very soon into love" ("Catalonia" 3). This letter is full of rapturous description of, for instance, "a heavenly journey" during which they rushed, but "spared time to steal some figs from a dry aromatic hillside," and of the head persecutor of a committee called Society for the Persecution of Fascists. He was "one of the nicest men I have ever met, dry and pale and wrinkled like a wise, warm-blooded lizard." In 1940, she wrote to Paul Nordoff:

I sometimes feel that my eyes will give out, perish if they don't rest on a Latin outline. I would like to sit on a hot stone wall, smothered in dust and breathing up the smell of those flat-faced roses that grow along the edge of Latin roads, or perhaps the rich harmonious stink of a heap of rotting oranges thrown in the ditch; and look at oxen, and small dark men with alert limbs and lazy movements, such as cats combine. And I would like to sit outside a cafe of atrocious architecture, drinking a pernod, and looking across at some Jesuit great-grandmother of a church that I shan't go into. And I would like to touch small hard dry hands like lizards and hear people saying tss tss when a handsome girl goes by. And see small proud boys making water against notices that say they're not to; and awful dogs of no known breed being addressed as jewel; or alternatively bastard or sexual pervert. (Letters 60)

And in 1975 she told two interviewers that she had "never seen people who I admired more" than the people of Spain, or "a country I loved as much as I loved Spain. A most ungainly country to love, but it's extraordinarily beautiful" ("In Conversation" 35).

As is the letter about holding the fox, and the diary entry about events leading up to her first sex with Ackland, these descriptions of Spain and the USSR are at once about her sensuous response to what she saw or experienced or imagined, and about political convictions. The letter to Nordoff certainly reflects a romantic response to things more

easily imaginable as irritants, at best, including rotting garbage, bad architecture, and men publicly assessing women's bodies—all because such things are in "Latin outlines." The letter also both reflects Warner's pleasure in iconoclastic and rebellious activity on anyone's part, such as "boys making water against notices that say . . . not to." and suggests that she perceives this behavior as typically Spanish.

### **Warner and Class Primitivism: The Picturesque**

If Warner writes romantically about wild animals and Spanish landscapes in letters and diaries, however, she is also, more than any other of the writers I am discussing, aware and critical of primitivizing and romanticizing ideas especially about the people to whose cause she is politically devoted. Warner writes most directly and critically about class primitivism in her journalism. Her first published work, "Behind the Firing Line: Some Experiences in a Munition Factory by a Lady Worker" (1916), critiques middle-class views of working-class lives as "picturesque" from the point of view of a temporary, middle-class, factory worker. The essay is mostly light-hearted, and reflects Warner's excitement about participating in a war-time scheme to relieve regular workers in a munitions factory with "women of leisure" (191).<sup>13</sup> But the essay also has a political charge. She notes that harsh conditions—including dangerously bad air quality, a lack of adequate tools, inadequate time for eating and drinking, and dirty bathrooms—make difficult and tedious work more difficult and tedious, and she challenges employers to improve conditions. Of the wages, she writes, "I am not doing [the factory work] for a livelihood, but if I were, I doubt if I should think it good pay" (204). And she juxtaposes her remarks about harsh working conditions and inadequate wages with a remembrance of "the large fortune that my employers were making" (200).

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<sup>13</sup> Warner herself later called it "youthfully precious" and was embarrassed to have participated in what she later realized was a scheme "devised to avoid the payment of overtime rates to the regular workers" ("The Way" 475).

Most importantly for my purposes, the essay is self-ironic and mocking of the narrator's own romantic view of working-class experience. The narrator confesses that "between signing on and beginning my training I went about telling my acquaintances joyously enough how hard I was going to work, and wondering inwardly what manner of thing I had let myself in for" (191). And she notes of herself and the other women who had been recruited that:

It was natural to be sprightly while the dirt could still be washed off, and the aches slept off without much difficulty, and while the idea of the extreme picturesqueness and daring of such an adventure as ours still upheld one. True that no one else seemed to see in our blue overalls anything but a uniform: we knew them, secretly, as a vestment. (195) [emphasis mine]

Warner is having fun here. But the "picturesqueness," "daring" and "adventure" with which she describes the situation of the relief workers are part of a concept of working-class labor that Warner is critiquing seriously. In the context of her challenge to employers and supervisors to improve conditions and pay, her irony about the point of view of the "women of leisure" suggests that romantic ideas about labor contribute to the problems of unnecessarily harsh conditions and inadequate wages. Employers and owners, she suggests, rely on romantic notions about labor as a justification for complaisance about conditions.

A 1939 essay, "The Way by Which I Have Come," is more bluntly critical of romantic views of working-class lives. Intended to chasten landowning farmers and motivate farm workers to join the Communist Party, the article begins with a description of Warner's childhood as that of a "happy and innocent little townee" who thought of the country as a place where "one was taken in wagonettes, with a clattering picnic-basket, to see the beauties of the district" (473). But the essay charts her gradual exposure to the realities of country life, and her move, as an adult, to rural Dorset. Warner details the inadequacies of the tied housing in Dorset, asserting that "houses that have gone bad weigh

heavily on those who live in them" (478). She catalogs "the average weekly mileage covered by the labourer's wife who fetches all her water from the well and carries all her slops to the ditch . . . the amount of repairs done to cottages and the amount that should be done; the average number of sleepers per bedroom and of rats per sleeper" (483). In the midst of this critique, she describes the house she bought there--Miss Green's Cottage--as attractive for its slate roof. Sod was the norm, and the source, according to Warner, of constant leaks and illness. The house is attractive, as well, for having "no claims to be picturesque." This is important because she was, by then, "exceedingly wary of that falsification of values which puts week-enders into sunbonnets and causes genuine regrets at any proposal to pull down a vermin-ridden, sixteenth century nuisance and build a sound dwelling in its place" (480-81). She says that she still "proposed to be a week-ender, though unsunbonneted," thus differentiating herself from those middle-class people who would idealize bad housing the working class had to live in.

Thirty years later after Valentine Ackland's death, Warner still emphasizes her own difference from those who value working-class housing for being "picturesque." In a narrative she wrote as part of I'll Stand By You, the correspondence between herself and Ackland, Warner writes of Miss Green's that it had been attractive because it was "freehold: An unevictable tenure" and not a tied cottage, as were most in the village, and that it had had "nothing to be said in its favor except that it was totally unpicturesque and stood by itself" (5).<sup>14</sup> A letter to Nancy Cunard also evidences Warner's antagonism toward the middle-class glorification of bad housing that she referred to as a desire for the "picturesque." She writes that she was trying to secure a coastguard cottage for Cunard to stay in during a visit. She predicts Cunard will like the cottages because of the landscape

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<sup>14</sup> Many years later, when Miss Green's is destroyed by a bomb, the tragedy is neither her loss of property nor the loss of a place nostalgic for her and Ackland. Rather, as Warner rails in a letter to Nancy Cunard and Morris Gilbert, the tragedy is that "the only decent cottage in that village, the only cottage kept in order, [is] gone, while the hovels belonging to the Weld estate, God damn it, are untouched in all their filth, scarcely a bug shaken out of them" (Letters 85).

around the cottages, and because they "are weatherproof, and not picturesque" (Letters 83).

### **Primitivism in Warner's Fiction**

In many if not all of her novels, Warner's characters express primitivist ideas about dark-skinned and working-class people to point to a character's racism, hypocrisy, and his or her absurdity.<sup>15</sup> Don Saturno is the central character in After the Death of Don Juan (1938), set in eighteenth-century Spain. More sympathetic than many of the characters, he is also an absurd and ineffectual landowner at his most unctuous when he assuages the anger of a group of tenants by showing them plans for an irrigation system he will never carry out. During the meeting, he reflects that his tenants are much more pleasant company than the clownish group of nobles who have invaded his quiet:

Their sunburned faces bent over the chart, the severe comeliness of their wiry limbs, their melancholy magpie clothes, delighted him like beholding a work of art after walking through a gallery of simpering wax-works. The tang of their speech comforted his ears after so much polite conversation, and it seemed to him that there was more Castilian in one sentence from Pedrillo than in a sackful of Anas and Ottavios. The Spain that he loved, pungent and austere, the Spain he studied in his library among histories, documents, charts, pedigrees, portraits and music-books: it was here in these five men talking about water; it would remain long after his insipid and expensive puppets had gone back to their town-house. (173-74)

It is possible to read this praise of the tenants for the aesthetic pleasure they give, their greater Spanishness, pungency and "tang," as Warner expressing in earnest her own compassion for Spanish peasantry and love of Spain, or her own belief that a somehow

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<sup>15</sup> What follows is a brief discussion of several of Warner's novels. For more discussion of Mr. Fortune's Maggot, The Flint Anchor, After the Death of Don Juan and The True Heart see Gay Wachman's "Crosswriting the Empire."

more authentic Spain is to be found among the peasants than among the nobility. The passage certainly has parallels with Warner's own description of the "Latin outline," and the "small dark men with alert limbs and lazy movements" she describes longing to see in her letter to Paul Nordoff. In an introduction to the 1989 reprint of Don Juan, Wendy Mulford does interpret the novel as partly about Warner's love for Spain, and her passionate involvement in saving Spain from fascism. But Mulford also says that the other subject of the novel is the "exploitation and oppression of the Spanish peasantry by the combined forces of Church and nobility" (v). As a part of the oppressive nobility, even if he is well-intentioned, the noble Don Saturno is treated ironically throughout the novel. He is at the mercy of the expensive habits of his womanizing son. While his tenants have little to eat, work hard, and still manage to muster revolutionary energy, his delight in them serves only to deflect their tendencies toward revolution and eventually to get them killed. When he speaks his praise of his tenants, his sincerity is undercut by the fact that they live in poverty on his land while he complainingly--but regularly and elegantly--feeds Anna and Ottavio and their retinue of servants and animals. The incongruous jumble of sources of information about authentic Spaniards--"histories, documents, charts, pedigrees, portraits and music-books"--as well as the slight alliteration at the end of the list, make his idealization of his tenants as artifacts rather than humans seem that much more insincere.

Warner is also critical of the kind of primitivism that enables middle-class displacement of sexuality onto the working class. The Flint Anchor (1954), set in the first half of the nineteenth century, is about the relatively unhappy and loveless lives of John Barnard, owner of a shipping business that makes money in Baltic trade, and his family of many children. Toward the end of the novel Barnard observes the public displays of physical affection between his daughter and her new husband, and realizes

he was an old fogey. He had grown up in an England which had the precision and balance of an engraving: good and bad, heaven and hell, Whig and Tory, Queen Charlotte and Queen Caroline. In that world modest

women behaved modestly, and what they might lack in ardour was supplied by women who had ceased to be modest. (282)

This passage marks the beginning of Barnard's somewhat insightful old age, but Barnard's insights are extremely limited. He never realizes he has used cultural beliefs about the "modesty" of respectable married women to avoid confronting sexuality altogether, his own homosexuality in particular. Julia will, he anticipates, be a "wall . . . her breasts like towers" that will defend him against "mothers of Loseby families" who are "continually jostling their daughters against him." Similarly, a wife will protect him from his "maidservants" who "did not directly menace his chastity" but "exercised an oblique pressure against his bachelor quiet" (8). Accordingly, Barnard has no desire for Julia in particular. He wishes before his wedding that he did not have to take her maidenhead (16). And after Julia's death, the narrator comments that Barnard had begotten his children "half-hearted[ly]":

Only Julia knew how discreditable to them both those occasions had been; how little love there had been on his side, how much unwomanly prompting on hers to rouse that little love into a brief lust, and how difficult it had been afterwards to conceal the resentment felt by both parties. (271).

Barnard's belief in the "modesty" of some and the ardorousness of others is part of a larger reliance on divisions that Warner critiques in his character--divisions symbolized from the beginning of the novel by the high spiked wall that surrounds his house, keeping it and his family always in partial shadow and separate from the rest of the surrounding town. The twin assertions of sexlessness among middle-class women and excessive sexuality among the working class is one aspect of a large-scale reliance on divisions that destroy Barnard's life.

Warner's The True Heart (1929) is about the quest of Sukey Bond, a young servant, to marry Eric, a young gentleman and an "idiot," against the wishes of just about everyone else in the novel. The novel reflects Warner's hostility to the arguments of

eugenicists who categorize blacks, homosexuals, criminals, and the mentally ill as those who should be prevented from reproducing in defense of the strength of the Empire. The novel also reflects Warner's awareness and rejection of myths of black hypersexuality. Two minor characters exchange the following remarks after they overhear Sukey reporting that she is with child:

"Fancy an idiot getting a girl that way," remarked the housemaid, filling her mouth with currants. "I shouldn't have thought it hardly possible."

"Oh, they're wonderful at it. Like the blacks. If you must wolf all the currants, all I say is, wolf those you've picked over yourself."

"Well, I call it disgusting. . . . (98)

Warner critiques these ideas about black hypersexuality as misguided and harmful in several ways. The characters who make the remarks about the sexuality of idiots and blacks are among the many who work against Sukey in her quest to find Eric, save him from life in an institution, and marry him. More important, this "knowledge" about black hypersexuality is made parallel--similarly clownish and unthinking--with a peevisish exchange over the number of currants picked versus those eaten.

But if Warner is overtly critical of ideology that displaces sexuality onto working-class women and blacks, and overtly critical of primitivizing middle-class ideas about "picturesque" working class lives, her critique of primitivizing stereotypes also has a blind spot. When it comes to representing homosexuality, and representing characters discovering homosexuality, Warner relies on class- and race-primitivist stereotypes that she critiques when homosexuality is not involved, stereotypes created and perpetuated in sexological writings. In The Flint Anchor, working-class sexuality, as opposed to Barnard's rigid walling out of homosexuality, is idealized as entirely free and openly inclusive of homosexuality. Warner is blatant in making this suggestion in the second half of the novel when Crusoe, a young fisherman, admits having written on a public wall "Tomas Kettle goes with Dandy Billy," characteristically misspelling "Thomas" to reveal

his identity, and thus get an opportunity to tell Thomas he loves him (197). To Thomas's assertion that "[f]or a man to love a man is a crime in this country," Crusoe replies:

Not in Loseby, Mr. Thomas, not in Loseby. Nor in any seagoing place, that I've a-heard of. It's the way we live, and always have been, whatever it may be inland. I can't say for inland. I never went there, and wouldn't want to particular. But in Loseby we go man with man and man with woman, and nobody think the worse. Why, they darsn't even preach against it. (205)

The Barnards later receive a letter from Thomas, who has been shipped off to some foreign destination for not denying that he "goes with Dandy Billy." The letter says he is on his deathbed, and is accompanied by a death certificate. But there is also the suggestion that Thomas has had a chance to live more fully than John Barnard manages specifically because Thomas has affiliated with fishermen and because he is eventually sent away from England: both of these moves enable him to see homosexuality as a possible kind of love. That Warner has a fisherman explain acceptance of homosexuality to a middle-class man, and that she writes the passage in Crusoe's working-class dialect--the only passage written in dialect in the entire novel--all locate homosexuality in the working class, and attribute middle-class discovery of homosexual possibilities to contact with working-class people and culture.

Crusoe's reply to Thomas also confirms the suspicion generated by other aspects of the novel that Barnard's own unhappiness is the result of excluding the possibility of homosexual love by walling himself off from any contact, except to give charity, with the working class. At the beginning of novel, the narrator explains that John Barnard is applauded for a speech, though

not for what he had said, but for how he looked while saying it. They [the Loseby fishermen] had not realized till now what a handsome young man they had got. . . . [H]e was revealed as very handsome indeed,

romantically handsome, with such glossy dark hair, such large bright eyes, and such well-made legs. Among Loseby fishermen it was taken as a matter of course that men should feel amorously towards a handsome young man. John Barnard on his twenty-first birthday was the image of a man's young man (women might feel that his forehead was too narrow and his nose too sharp), and Job Ransom, bellowing out his toast of "Mr. Barnard-bless his flesh!" summed up the mood of the occasion. (8)

Barnard is, himself, oblivious to the fishermen's homoerotic responses to his appearance. But the novel suggests that were John Barnard as capable of admitting homoeroticism as the fishermen of Loseby, or were he able to make friends, as Thomas does, with the fishermen, and thus be exposed to the possibility of homoeroticism, he might have avoided many of the "error[s] in love" by which he made himself and everyone around him miserable.

In Mr. Fortune's Maggot, homoeroticism is similarly positioned as accessible to an Englishman among Pacific Islanders. In this novel, Timothy Fortune, an English missionary, goes to the Pacific island of Fanua, marked as a primitive place by the fact that Mr. Fortune's watch, by which he has previously organized every aspect of every day, stops running shortly after his arrival. This is consistent with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century beliefs that Pacific Island societies, among other African, Asian and American societies, are stuck in the past, having not yet passed through barbarism and savagery to get to enlightenment.<sup>16</sup> According to Freud's explanation of the development of human sexuality, it would also follow that Fanuans, if they are stuck in the early phases of human development, are also bisexual. Whether or not Warner read Freud, his ideas, as well as popularizations of primitivizing anthropology, were in wide circulation by the time she wrote Mr. Fortune. Consistent with these anthropological and psychological

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<sup>16</sup> David Theo Goldberg identifies this belief in the historylessness of some societies as one of the tenets of racist primitivism.

constructions of dark-skinned people and their geographies. Mr. Fortune is transformed by Fanua. He submits, under the pretense of relief for an injury, to sensual massage over increasingly numerous parts of his body. His masseur, Lueli, is a young Fanuan who befriends him, and who Mr. Fortune thinks is his one convert to Christianity. In fact, it is Mr. Fortune who is converted, finally, to sensual and homoerotic partial self-awareness—as well as to anti-church and anti-imperialist sentiment—by his contact with Lueli, and Fanua itself.

Warner's representation of the way in which middle-class white people get access to homoerotic influence is not a product of her own imagination. The claim in The Flint Anchor that homosexuality flourishes among seafaring men certainly reflects the fact that sexologists wrote about upper- and middle-class gay men preferred sexual relationships with working-class men. Her representation of the homosexualization of middle-class whites follows the model established by anthropologists and sexologists who sought to take the measure of Euro-American middle-class sexual behavior by writing comparative ethnographies. Ackland and Warner read and valued sexological writings.<sup>17</sup> Warner can't seem to talk about homosexuality among middle-class whites without there being a working-class or racialized person as part of the scene as a source of the sexuality to which she wants to expose a middle-class white person. She represents homosexuality in terms of contact between middle- or upper-class whites and dark skinned or working-class characters.

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<sup>17</sup> In a post-script to one of the letters published in I'll Stand by You, Ackland asks if Warner could "bring back our Havelock Ellis? Or Block? or Krafft-Ebing?" (199). In a footnote, Warner explains that "[i]n 1942 we had been told, confidentially, that in the event of an invasion our house would be requisitioned as a machine-gun post—in which case we would have to leave at short notice. So we packaged our smaller dear possessions and housed them with friends in less menaced places. One of these deposits was a crate of 17th cent. folios and Nonesuch editions with Havelock Ellis etc. squeezed in among them, which I had taken to Little Zeal [her mother's house]" (199n).

### Five: Summer Will Show: Class, Sex and Race Primitivism

Sylvia Townsend Warner's 1936 novel Summer Will Show, set in rural England and in Paris of 1848, exhibits the complicated mix of political rage, activism and sensuous love I have been tracing throughout her work, as well as a paradoxical combination of primitivism and anti-imperialism. The obvious political goal of the novel is to encourage the rural laborers of Dorset, among whom Warner and Ackland were working as organizers, to join the Communist Party. Warner and Ackland's experiences as Party organizers showed them that workers were often kept apart, especially women from men, by "deference and fear" as well as "low wages, long hours, and isolation . . . within communities" (Mulford 62). As if in response, the novel presents an argument that working-class men and women have common cause against hierarchies--those based on economics and those based on gender--that keep them from uniting and on which exploitation depends. The novel also makes an argument for an international as well as anti-racist approach to ending capitalist and imperialist exploitation. The two murders at the end of the novel are a direct result of the failure of Warner's protagonist, Sophia, to make a political alliance with her nephew Caspar, a fourteen-year old Caribbean "half-caste" (34), as part of her developing Communist economic and political analysis. Warner suggests, with these two deaths as examples, other deaths that are also the result of failures in alliance making. The novel claims that unless English workers, including soldiers and potential soldiers, make common cause with one another and with the exploited producers of English capital in the colonies, revolutionary efforts are inadequate at best and likely doomed to failure.

Summer Will Show is also Warner's most obviously lesbian novel.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Early reviewers and critics do not mention the novel's lesbian erotics. In a 1975 celebration of Sylvia Townsend Warner edited by Claire Harman, neither Warner's lesbianism nor the lesbianism of the novel is mentioned specifically, but Arnold Rattenbury says Sophia and Minna "meet and eventually live together" (47), and J. Lawrence Mitchell writes that Sophia is "drawn to Minna" (52). Jane Marcus, Thomas Foster, Barbara Brothers and Janet Montefiore also assume Sophia's lesbianism in essays that focus more specifically on the politics of the novel. Terry Castle is the first to take the lesbianism of the novel as a point of analysis. In an essay that inverts Eve Sedgwick's theory that homosocial relations between men are central to canonized English and American literature,

elliptically presented lesbianism between Sophia and Minna Lemuel in the second half of the novel is foreshadowed by Sophia's naively homoerotic response to her neighbor Mrs. Hervey, as has been noted by both Terry Castle (83) and Thomas Foster (545)<sup>2</sup>. But Warner also writes Sophia's lesbianism as sexual curiosity about the "strange loves" of the working-class lime-kiln man, and her romantic interpretation of Caspar's West Indian appearance and origins, which function as metonymy for Sophia's difference—a difference specifically to do with her gender orientation and her sensuality. The combination of politics with depictions of lesbianism in Summer Will Show clearly reveal the paradox of Warner's simultaneous critique of, and reliance on, primitivist stereotypes about the working-class and dark-skinned people, including Jews. In Summer Will Show, the tropes of access to sexuality are specifically: working men's hands,<sup>3</sup> working-class political rage, Caribbean and Lithuanian origins, Jewish features and animalism, Gypsy "wandering,"<sup>4</sup> and the history of Jewish huntedness. By means of contact with these, a white landowning

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Castle calls Summer Will Show "exemplary 'lesbian fiction'" and "paradigmatically 'lesbian'" because the novel "depicts a sexual relationship between two women" and because it "figures this relationship as a breakup of the supposedly 'canonical' male-female-male erotic triangle" (74). She admits that Warner "renders the scene of [Sophia and Minna's] coming together elliptically—with only a cry (and an oyster) to suggest the moment of consummation" but argues that "the meaning is clear" (79). Two critics have challenged Castle's claim that Minna and Sophia's relationship is sexual: Robert Caserio claims that Sophia and Minna are part of a literary tradition of chaste sisters; Sandy Petrey argues that the pair is ambiguously sexual at most, and signals more than anything else a characteristic ambiguity on Warner's part. But Castle's interpretation, and her subsequent responses to Caserio and Petrey in the notes to the version of the essay published in The Apparitional Lesbian are persuasive and have set the standard for subsequent discussion of Summer Will Show, such as Thomas Foster's "Dream Made Flesh" and Julie Abraham's Are Girls Necessary.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Foster argues that Warner's narrative "can avoid more direct sexual references [about Sophia and Minna] in part because they are displaced onto an earlier scene between Sophia and the wife of a doctor, Mrs. Hervey" (545).

<sup>3</sup> Warner often describes working men's hands, always "hard," especially capable politically, and often bearing a broken or blackened nail. This hand also appears in Cather's short story "Neighbor Rosicky" as a symbol of Rosicky's experience as an urban laborer and his wisdom about work and freedom.

<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps a sexual wandering similar to Melanctha's wandering in Gertrude Stein's Three Lives.

woman fully discovers her political "assignment with the fox" and lesbian-erotic "happiness," as Sophia puts it.

Critics of Summer Will Show generally assume that Minna is the agent and source of Sophia's sexual and political transformations.<sup>5</sup> But hints of Sophia's homoerotic inclination abound in the first third of the novel that takes place on Sophia's estate, Blandamer, before Sophia ever goes to Paris or meets Minna. The early lesbian-erotic hints and scenes foreshadow the lesbianism Sophia later experiences with Minna. More significantly for my purposes, in the early part of the novel, Sophia rejects lesbian erotics with Mrs. Hervey explicitly because of Mrs. Hervey's middle-class status. This initial rejection of lesbian possibility emphasizes Warner's consistent use of working-class and dark-skinned figures to explain homoerotic transformation and indulgence. Sophia rejects lesbian-sexual possibility with middle-class Mrs. Hervey, but with Jewish Minna, she is compelled.

Hints of Sophia's lesbianism begin in the first scene. As Sophia walks her children over her parched land toward the lime-kiln to breathe fumes as a cure for whooping cough, their latest malady, she reflects that "[i]t was a pity (for many reasons it was a pity) that she

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<sup>5</sup> Nearly all critics, including those who focus on the lesbianism as well as those who focus on the politics of the novel, have ignored the importance of the lime-kiln man and Caspar. Thomas Foster's "Dream Made Flesh" is an important exception. Foster discusses the lesbianism in Summer Will Show in terms of both the class politics of the novel and the conventions of modern narrative, including the "problematic relation between women's stories and Marxist traditions of historical analysis" (538). Foster credits Warner's disruption of the "boundary between domestic or sentimental fiction and the historical novel" with enabling "the narrativizing of other forms of social difference, including not only alternative sexualities but also race and class differences" (536). About the scene involving the lime-kiln man, discussed below, Foster argues that Sophia's decision to go to Paris to seek impregnation by Frederick "represents an identification with the different class sexuality of 'other women'" (541). About Caspar, Foster argues that the subplot involving him "returns the story of the women's participation in revolutionary struggle to the women's relationship and its consequences" because it reveals "the conflicts between a lesbian who has chosen not to reproduce and the social forces that demand she assume the role of mother" (553). Foster also claims, importantly, that the subplot about Caspar "points to the existence of narratives organized around other social antagonisms, between a member of an English colonial family and a West Indian mulatto, between a Jewish emigrant and a child indoctrinated with nationalist and anti-semitic propaganda" (553-54).

was not a man." as then she "could have known with more assurance how Papa would have brought up a boy" (6). The parenthetical and cryptic "for many reasons," here, suggests that in addition to wanting to be a better parent to a boy, there is something only parenthetically expressible, such as lesbian desire, in Sophia's wish to be a man. This wish also reflects "sexological discourse of homosexual desire as 'inversion'" (Foster 540).

Lesbianism is hinted by Sophia's disinterest in her husband, Frederick. His absence is unregrettable: her marriage is "that deplorable mating" (20). Her original impulse to marry at all is only "a sudden imperious curiosity to know what the love of man and woman might be, which at the first learning had shrivelled away and left her cold and unamorous" (255). She describes herself as "opposed" and "frigid" to "wine and the love of man" (77, 78). Over life as a wife, she prefers to husband the life around her.<sup>6</sup> Her concern in the early part of the novel is to ensure reproductivity of life on her estate, from her children to "Dymond's bull" to "Topp's eldest girl" (20, 23) to tomato vines, from which she approves the pinching off of underdeveloped fruit for the benefit of the more promising (23). This philosophy of husbandry extends even to her daughter Augusta's hair, which is "cropped to make it grow more strongly" (8).

Sophia's belief that freedom is being rid of the conventions of her gender also foreshadows her lesbianism. She enjoys her visit to the Trebennick Academy because the smell of the air makes her feel "absolved back into animal," and she has the impression that "one waft of wind there would blow . . . the petticoats from one's legs . . . leaving one free, swift, unburdened as a fox" (36). She imagines that there she might live

a wild romantic life in which, unsexed and unpersoned, she rode, sat in  
inns, slept in a bracken bed among the rocks, bathed naked in swift-running

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<sup>6</sup> In a few ways, including Warner's punning creation of Sophia as "husband," Sophia seems modeled on Valentine Ackland. Like Valentine, for instance, Sophia shoots and cuts down trees (52).

brooks, knocked people down, outwitted shadowy enemies, poached one night with gypsies, in another went a keeper's round with a gun under her arm. (36)

Here Sophia links both wild animals and Gypsies with freedom from gender, as well as stating her preference for playing the masculine role of "keeper" with a gun.

Sophia's interactions with Mrs. Hervey, the doctor's wife, explicitly foreshadow the lesbian eros of the end of the novel. When Damian and Augusta, Sophia's children, are dying, Mrs. Hervey makes a sympathy call; another time she climbs through a window into Sophia's drawing room, drenched by a storm, to show Sophia the doctor's letter recalling Frederick to his children's bedside (68-72). Mrs. Hervey is outraged that anyone thinks he has a right "to interfere, to discuss and plot. . . . As if, whatever happened, you could not stand alone, and judge for yourself! As if you needed a man!" (72).

The language Warner uses to describe the interactions give the visits erotic subtexts. Mrs. Hervey knows her visit is "indiscreet" (70) and "peculiar" (72). She keeps "redde[n]g as a schoolgirl in fault" (71), speaks "passionately" (72), and confesses something like sexual attraction, though she doesn't know how to name it: "I have thought of you day and night, ever since that first evening . . . my husband sent me to you. You can't understand, and I can't express it" (70).

Sophia is irritated by Mrs. Hervey's "genteel" and "boarding-school" manners, but also observes that her company has "a certain reviving quality," and her eyes a beauty Sophia will "never forget" (57-58). When Mrs. Hervey gives her an awkward embrace goodbye, Sophia notices the feel of her lips--"[h]ot, a little roughened . . . like those of a child"--and thinks "[s]he might be in love with me" (58).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Warner is evoking and perhaps making fun of widespread eighteenth- and nineteenth-century acceptance of romantic friendship between women based on the assumption that such friendships were necessarily asexual. Sophia embraces conventional beliefs about the asexuality of romantic friendship when she thinks Mrs. Hervey might be in love with her, and is at the same time unconscious of the erotic tension that readers can't fail to see.

During the second visit, Sophia is irritated that while her children are dying she must "sit here, dosing this little ninny with port and waiting to hear what fool's errand brought her" (69). But she is also surprised to feel "a sudden dash of tenderness and amusement" and to be "almost glad that . . . Mrs Hervey was here, blown in at the window like a dragged bird" (70). Sophia is aware that "[t]he letter, lying so calmly on [Mrs. Hervey's] lap, seemed to have no real part in this to-do. Some other motive, violent and unexperienced as the emotions of youth, trembled undeclared between them" (72). She thinks "we might be two schoolgirls . . . two romantic misses, stolen from our white beds to exchange illicit comfits, and trembling lest amid this stage-rattling thunderstorm we should hear the footsteps of Mrs Goodchild" (72). Looking back on this visit, Sophia reflects that it was prompted by a "misguided impulse" (89).

Mrs. Hervey's pronouncement that a husband isn't necessary agitates Sophia by transgressing her sense of sexual decorum. In response, she reasserts calming heterosexual normalcy: she thinks of things "practical, proper, and immediate" to do, including physically reasserting the semblance of heterosexuality by expelling Mrs. Hervey from her house and determining to send letters--her own and Dr. Hervey's--recalling Frederick. Sophia removes "all traces of [Mrs. Hervey's] extraordinary visit," for "such escapades were intolerable. One could not have such young women frisking round one, babbling as to whether or no one needed a husband, declaring on one's behalf that one didn't" (74).

If in rejecting Mrs. Hervey, however, Sophia calms her mind, she also abandons her body. She feels "round her steadied mind . . . her flesh hanging cold and forlorn, as though in this conflict she had for ever abandoned it" (73). Rejecting Mrs. Hervey means to Sophia rejecting the possibility of sexual contact. She is "frigid to the love of wine and man," but might "be warmed" by traveling with Mrs. Hervey if her children die, she reflects. If "[a] woman cannot travel alone . . . two women may travel together" (78). But as soon as she considers it, Sophia rejects this "foolish vision," thinking Mrs. Hervey is

appealing not for anything she "really is," but only because she offers a "dew of being young and impulsive" to Sophia's "aridity" (78-79). Though this passage is overtly about travel as a preoccupation, Sophia's talk about being "warmed" rather than "frigid" makes it - also about sex, as does Warner's use of a metaphor of wetness: dry Sophia will be dampened by Mrs. Hervey's impulsiveness. Warner uses this metaphor elsewhere, as well. Sophia sees Blandamer as "parched" and "barren" when she walks to the kiln with her children. But as she walks Mrs. Hervey home, holding her hand, she hears, louder than the storm's thunder, "the sipping whistle, all around them, of the parched ground drinking the rain" (74).

But even more significant for the progression of the novel than Sophia's erotic response to Mrs. Hervey, is Sophia's repression of that response specifically because of Mrs. Hervey's class position. Class-specific behavioral norms are the reason Mrs. Hervey's pronouncement against the need for husbands is so upsetting. Sophia reflects that:

[f]rom a woman of the village she could have heard such words without offence. Down there in that lowest class, sexual decorum could be kilted out of the way like an impeding petticoat: and Mary Bogler, whose husband was in jail, and Carry Westmacott, whose husband should be, might declare without offence that a woman was as good as a man, and better. (74)

A woman of the upper classes can think such things, and even dismiss a husband, but she can't say she doesn't need a husband. Sophia continues.

[i]n her own heart . . . unreprieved, could lodge the conviction that a Sophia might well discard a Frederick, and in her life she had been ready, calmly enough, to put this into effect. But into words, never! Such things could be done, but not said. . . .

[I]n this room, the serene demonstration of how a lady of the upper classes spends her leisure amid flowers and books and arts, words had been

spoken such as those walls had never heard before. (75)

Sophia says she is prepared to dismiss Frederick silently, but--as "a lady of the upper classes"--she is not prepared to act or speak in an independent way, sexual or otherwise, with Mrs. Hervey, whose suggestion about the irrelevance of husbands is itself evidence of middle-class vulgarity.

Sophia's dislike of Mrs. Hervey is a revulsion to her middle-class status elsewhere, too. Sophia refers to Mrs. Hervey repeatedly in terms of her husband's profession: the wife of a Doctor. (70, 75) and calls her disparagingly a "boarding school miss" (70),<sup>8</sup> and a "social minnikin" (75): Mrs. Hervey has merely "an exasperating gesture of refinement," a "false refinement" (70, 75). The two have walked hand in hand, but "a visiting relationship between [sic] them [is] neither possible nor desirable" according to Sophia (89). Mrs. Hervey's house is in a village with "genteel pretensions enough" to support several shops, villas and a chapel. But "it represented the new world, as Blandamer Abbots, with its mud-walled cottages, tithe barn, and one great house, represented the old" (89). Mrs. Hervey's mother is also of this new world--a vapid "stout matron" who prances and assails Sophia with chairs and unfinished sentences, whose cap ribbons flutter, and who contributes to making the Hervey house a "narrow den of gentility" and an "airless closet" (90).

### **Absolving Back into Animal: Minna Lemuel**

While Sophia rejects the possibility of erotic relations with Mrs. Hervey, however, despite proximity, need of solace, and a seeming--if only partially conscious--willingness on Mrs. Hervey's part, she warms in one day to both wine and "passionate amity" with Minna Lemuel. Sophia's response to Minna is erotic from first contact.<sup>9</sup> More significantly,

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<sup>8</sup> Boarding school is for people of Mrs. Hervey's class. People of Sophia's class have governesses and tutors at home.

<sup>9</sup> Even before they meet in the flesh, Sophia becomes obsessed with Minna, though this could be interpreted as sexual fascination for Minna specifically as her husband's lover.

Sophia is compelled by Minna in a way that she is not by Mrs. Hervey. The erotic subtext of Sophia's interactions with Mrs. Hervey becomes overt erotic text in interactions with Minna.

Sophia's first contact with Minna takes place in Paris at a party in Minna's apartment, where Sophia has gone to find Frederick and "beguile" him into giving her another child (99). Minna entertains her guests with a tale about her childhood in Lithuania and the pogrom in which her family was killed. At the first sound of Minna's "siren voice" (145), Sophia thinks "[s]ee her I must" (115). When she does see, it is "as though she had never opened her eyes before" (145). Sophia's gaze on Minna throughout the tale is "faithful" (136), and gets her, in reply, "the smile of the dutiful child" (127) and a swift "confidential grimace" (136). And because of her gaze, when the storytelling is interrupted, Minna tells her, "I was sorry to lose such listening as yours. Yes, as yours. Did you not know that I was speaking to you?" (140).

Thoughts of Minna tease intensely after this initial contact. Sophia fears that "[s]he would never know, never know more!" about Minna (138). To go home without becoming pregnant would be disappointing, but worse would be never "knowing more about Minna," departing "as tantalized, as unfulfilled" (139) as previous dreams of Minna had left her.<sup>10</sup> Sophia fears sexual loss, in particular. When she falls asleep on Minna's

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When Frederick arrives at Blandamer to see his dying children, Sophia reflects that the "Jewess" has improved him. If he once left Sophia "cold and unamorous," he is transformed into a sensual figure. He is a "foreigner" (80) a "stranger" (82) who walks with a "freer gait, a liberated air" (81). His words "[m]a fleur," spoken to Augusta as she is dying, echo in Sophia's ears after Frederick has gone, alternately "an enigma, a nettling" and, most suggestively, "a caress" (83). Textures of Frederick's speech, "[m]odelled on that Minna's Jewish contralto," "fascinate" and "elude" Sophia (84). His improved French accent is the result of Minna having "suppled his tongue" (85). Sophia can "smell Minna on him, as though he had brought bodily into the house the odour of his mistress," and can't "remember Frederick without snuffing Minna" (87). Sophia's obsession even includes dreams of Minna that are so disturbing she decides to give her thoughts about Mrs. Hervey "free rein, since it was better to be teased by Mrs Hervey than by Minna" (88-9).

<sup>10</sup> Sophia dreams of Minna when Frederick comes home exhibiting Minna's influence on him.

couch and dreams she is headed home.

it was not for the loss of the child she mourned so desperately. Something else was lost, there was some other hope some other promise irretrievably mismanaged and irretrievably lost and it was for this something, this unpossessed unknown, that she mourned in such desolation, having not even the comfort of knowing what was for ever left behind and forfeited.  
(150)

That she can't name precisely what she will lose likens it to the "other motive" that Sophia notices "trembled undeclared between" her and Mrs. Hervey (72).

Minna also sparks in Sophia a "curiosity" such as she has "[n]ever in her life . . . felt . . . or dreamed . . . possible" (145). "Curiosity," here, is the same specifically sexual impulse that leads her to marry Frederick. But if that experiment left her "cold and unamorous," and if she chooses mind over body in her exchange with Mrs. Hervey, the curiosity over Minna directs Sophia back to the body. This curiosity "went beyond speculation, a thing not of the brain but in the blood. It burned in her like a furnace, with a steadfast compulsive heat that must presently catch Minna in its draught, hale her in, and devour her" (145).

Without ever being explicit, Warner elaborates on the erotic connection between Sophia and Minna for the rest of the novel by reference to passion, compulsion, warmth, sensual textures, throbbing, stroking, womanhood, kisses, caresses and bewitchment. Sophia wants to "unburden herself" to Minna and to "explain passionately:" she is "compelled" by Minna (147). When Sophia falls asleep on Minna's couch, she lies "passive under the hands that untied her bonnet-strings and took off her shoes, and covered her with something warm and furry, stroking her, slowly, heavily, like the hands of sleep, stroking her hair and her brow" (150-1). Talking to Minna, Sophia "felt the weight of her whole life throbbing to be recounted . . . her womanhood rose up crowded and clear before her" (156). The image of Minna "thoughtfully licking the last oyster shell" invites a sexual

reading, as Terry Castle (79) and Thomas Foster (544) have both noted. At various other times, Sophia and Minna pace "arm in arm," and get "too excited to finish a meal" (276): Sophia admires Minna's eyelashes (252), or "caresses" Minna to warm her and take her pulse when she is ill (250, 254). Sophia professes to love her for her "odd mixture of nobility and extravagance" (290). While Minna's body is "heavy, ill-framed, and faintly grotesque" by day, at night it "achieved an extraordinary harmoniousness with its bed, became in suavity and sober resilience the sister of that exemplary mattress" (299). Sophia's "whole being" is "ravaged with love and tenderness" watching Minna eat a biscuit in bed at night (301). Sophia remarks with some amazement that Minna had "freed her from" ideas about how and why "[o]ne ought to love" and granted her "one flower, liberty" (290-91).

Minna's influence over Sophia, in stark contrast to Mrs. Hervey's more mundane attractions, has the power of witchery. Sophia is under "some extraordinary enchantment" from the time Sophia gets wind of Minna's voice (261). The pogrom narrative that captivates Sophia once she meets Minna in person is a "spell broken" (141) when the concierge interrupts with his announcement that the revolutionaries want carriages for the barricade. And when Sophia is temporarily back under the influence of her Aunt Leocadie and aristocratic feminine decorum, she suspects Minna of having "laid some spell on her common sense" (184).

Minna claims her role in Sophia's transformation, too, saying "I've encouraged a quantity of people to run away, but I have never seen anyone so decisively escaped as you" (225), and again, saying, "I have converted Sophia now" (281). Sophia is indeed transformed. Waking up on Minna's couch, Sophia thinks "she could do anything, go anywhere, if she could spend a day in such passionate amity with her husband's mistress. Hers was the liberty of the fallen woman now" (156). Accordingly, she moves in with Minna: collects scrap metal for revolutionary bullets intended for use in carrying out the threat of the slogan, "bread or lead;" delivers copies of a pamphlet that turn out to be the

Communist Manifesto; and eventually fights behind a barricade alongside revolutionaries.

Just as Warner makes it clear that Sophia rejects erotic engagement with Mrs. Hervey specifically because she is middle-class, Warner makes it clear that Sophia is "bewitched" and transformed by Minna largely because Minna is a Lithuanian Jew and, as such, like a hunted animal. I believe Warner sets out to underline the limitations of Sophia's world view by making her incapable of considering a middle-class woman's sexuality, as she also points out Bernard's similarly limited conception of middle-class women's asexuality in The Flint Anchor. But Warner also relies on a corresponding set of conceptions about hypersexuality and race. Her plot turns on the stereotype of the primitive Oriental that says Minna's erotics will be especially powerful, compelling, and transformative even to the point of bewitchment. In her reliance on this trope, Warner follows the model employed by sexologists.

Sophia's responses to and descriptions of Minna emphasize both repulsiveness and sensuality as products of her darkness and her Judaism. When Sophia first sees Minna, she is both repelled and attracted, first describing her face as

ugly, uglier than one could have believed, hearing that voice. A discordant face . . . for the features with their Jewish baroque, the hooked nose, the crescent eyebrows and heavy eyelids, the large full-lipped mouth, are florid, or should be; but the hollow cheeks forbid them and she is at once a heavy voluptuous cat and a starved one. (123-24)

Sophia also imagines Minna making a gesture that conforms to stereotypes of Jews as avaricious, but that also "caresses" provocatively. Minna "savors" those listening to her story as if they were "money-bags." Sophia thinks:

Our ears are your ducats. You are exactly like a Jewish shopkeeper. . . . In a moment you should rub your hands, the shopkeepers gesture.

. . . . Then, as though in compliance, Minna's large supple hands gently caressed themselves together in the very gesture of [Sophia's]

thought. (127)

Warner is marking Sophia's limitations here, in Sophia's expectations of stereotypically Jewish behavior. But to whatever degree Warner is being ironic about Sophia's belief in Jewish stereotypes, she is also mixing up references to Minna's Judaism with Sophia's compulsive attraction to her.

The sources of Minna's simultaneous compellingness and sensuousness are Judaism and darkness elsewhere as well. Minna has a "siren voice" housed in a "thick, milk-coffee coloured throat" (145). Sophia wants to talk to her "as though the Jewess's impassive attention had been a dark sleek-surfaced pool into which, as one is compelled to cast a stone." Sophia wants to "cast her confidence" (147).

Also, one of the ways that Warner marks the erotic change Minna effects on Sophia is having Sophia warm to wine and Minna simultaneously. This refers back to Sophia's remarks that she was "frigid to the love of wine and man" (77, 78). But the scene in which Sophia "warms" to wine and to Minna makes a direct assertion that Sophia's frigidity thaws to some specifically Jewish essence. In their first interaction, Minna offers Sophia hot wine that both smells of Lithuanian forests and feels to Sophia like a caress. Sophia thinks, "[t]he warm spiced scent, slightly resinous, as though the Jewess had mixed all the summer forests of her childhood in the cup, was like a caress." And "[r]ound the first sip she felt her being close, haggard and hungry" (139). The next morning, Minna's glance is inextricable from the wine: Minna takes Sophia's hand and gazes "at her with a possessive earnest glance, a glance that instantly recalled the taste of the mulled wine offered overnight" (154). And later, having taken Minna to dinner and ordered a Beaujolais following "an axiom of Papa's," Sophia "yield[s] again to that wine-like sensation of ease and accomplished triumph which had been with her all day" (160).

As Minna is marked racially, she and her apartment are also outfitted with a garishly tattered, colorful mishmash of oriental and occidental objects. When Sophia stares at Minna, she sees "sleek braids of black hair and the smooth milk-coffee coloured shoulders.

the drooping yellow scarf lined with rather shabby ermine" (138). The sofa on which Sophia sleeps is "a gilded sofa upholstered in pink brocade." And the clothes she wakes up in include a "yellow ermine-lined scarf," a "scarlet dyed sheepskin," and "a pair of sky-blue woollen slippers." "It was," she thinks, "like waking up in the bosom of a macaw" (151). In addition to this reference to a tropical bird, the apartment's furnishings include "what looked like the beginnings of a curiosity shop":

A mandoline leaned against a mounted suit of armour, a Gothic beaker, ecclesiastically embossed with false gems, stood on a Louis-Seize trifletable and propped an Indian doll with tinsel robes, beaded nose-ring, and black cotton features of a languishing cast. Dangling over a harp was a Moorish bridle. On the walls hung scimitars and bucklers, pieces of brilliant embroidery, tapestries, and a quantity of pictures. (151)

This mix of oriental and occidental objects, brilliantly colored, is in contrast to the whiteness with which Warner characterizes Blandamer. The "Bland" in the name points both to tiresomeness and to whiteness. In addition, coming home with Frederick from their aborted honeymoon, Sophia "beheld the chalk cliffs of Kent whose whiteness promised her the chalk downs of Dorset" (27). The oriental mishmash of Minna's apartment is also in direct contrast with Doctor Hervey's prim neighborhood and house. His neighborhood is full of nursemaids, "beribboned children and fat pug-dogs;" his house is described by its "green-painted trellis . . . white front" and "pocket-handkerchief lawn" (89). Similarly, Minna's voluptuousness is in contrast to Mrs. Hervey's mother's incessant babbling, prancing, fluttering, and stoutness (90).

Minna's Jewishness also contains animalism, which is, like the reference to wine, one of the ways Warner marks Minna's erotic and compelling effects on Sophia. At the Trebennick Academy, Sophia imagined that freedom from gender constraints meant being "absolved back into animal," and being "as unburdened as a fox" (36). Minna is a Jew who can "extend a paw" for Sophia (145), releasing her from constraints about gender and

sex, and from the constraints of her class as well. Before Sophia even meets her, Sophia compares Minna, as a Jew, to a dog and a creature. She is

A byword, half actress, half strumpet; a Jewess; a nonsensical creature bedizened with airs of prophecy, who trailed across Europe with a tag-rag of poets, revolutionaries, musicians and circus-riders snuffing at her heels, like an escaped bitch with a procession of mongrels after her; and ugly; and old . . . . (emphasis added) (31)

Sophia imagines Minna, her sexuality in particular, as that of an animal. Also, while it is the people who desire Minna rather than Minna herself who are "mongrels," Sophia's description still suggests that Minna's sexuality has to do with inferior mixing of breeds in a way antithetical to Sophia's early preoccupation with improving the strength of her own and other lineages through selective breeding.

At other places in the novel Minna is a "vital creature" with a "dispirited tail" (145). She resembles "a heavy voluptuous cat and a starved one" (123). She makes "no more claims on one's moral approval than a cat" and "her flashes of goodness were as painless as an animal's" (291). Sophia compares her to a sheep being sheared when she is ill, and watches Minna's face "for some kindred sign of animal strategy" (250). During the pogrom narrative, Minna is a hunted creature pursued over the snow by Christians, mis-named by Frederick "Wolves" (130). This Jewish huntedness associates Minna both with the fox who is, in Sophia's imagination, "unburdened," but also, more significantly, to the hunted fox with whom Sophia feels an "assignation" during a hunting party. And certainly this fox is reminiscent of the orphaned fox, with paws soft as raspberries, that Warner describes in her letters.

Warner is underlining the limitations of Sophia's character by her blatantly anti-semitic ideas of what makes Minna ugly and deceitful, including, in addition to what is quoted above, a "complexion that could look greasy" (291). But however much Warner is intentionally creating Sophia's offensiveness by constructing an hyperbolic anti-semitism,

Warner also relies on Minna's Judaism to justify why a Sophia previously frigid to Frederick, wine, and Mrs. Hervey can undergo a liberating thaw. Minna's exceptionally transformative power, her compelling erotics, are products of her oriental Jewishness. Sophia's "thaw" doesn't happen with Mrs. Hervey because Mrs. Hervey is a middle-class white woman: it does happen directly as a result of contact with a Jew, in a country not her own, away from the whiteness of Blandamer, and in the context of revolution. Warner's plot of sexual transformation turns on contact between characters who are marked as racially different.

### **The Lime-Kiln Man**

This trope of homosexual transformation via contact with sexualized, racialized others is also at play in terms of class. Critics of Summer Will Show, very reasonably, attribute Sophia's transformation to Minna because of the eros between them and because Sophia meets the revolutionaries through Minna. But Warner also makes the lime-kiln man at least as pivotal to Sophia's sexual and political transformations as Minna is. Specifically, it is his working-class status that makes contact with him so powerfully transformative. If Minna is a spell-caster and the instrument of Sophia's transformation, she is an agent conjured by the lime-kiln man, a Satan-like figure similar to the Satan who contributes to Laura's liberation in Lolly Willowes. Though the kilnman never reappears after the beginning of the novel, it is he, not Minna, who first sets Sophia's transformation in motion and whose political analysis resonates through the novel. His character and the "red winking eye" of the kiln are symbols of Marxism and of the revolutionary fire Warner worked to keep alive among rural workers. Most importantly for my purposes, his sexuality sparks the sexual curiosity that Sophia later satisfies with Minna. Just as Warner relies on contact between Sophia and compelling, hunted Jewishness to explain Sophia's sexual change, she also relies on contact between Sophia and reputed working-class hypersexuality, embodied by the kilnman (a man similar to those among whom Warner

spent her political time organizing) to set that change, as well as Sophia's political transformation, in motion.

The most obvious way in which Sophia's transformation and the plot of the novel turn on the kilnman's presence is that the children contract smallpox from him, which prompts Sophia's desire to become pregnant with another heir, and, in turn, prompts her trip to Paris. But Warner makes much more of the kilnman than she might have if she were only looking for an accident to propel Sophia to Paris and/or to Minna. He is exceptionally powerful from his first appearance--both "priest-like" (16) and demonic. To Hannah, the children's nurse, approaching the kiln is like "advancing towards an altar of Moloch"--a Canaanite idol to whom children were sacrificed and one of Milton's chief fallen angels. Hannah thinks, "the look of the kiln, too, was ecclesiastical in a heathen way . . . . [T]he fumes trembled upon the air, glassy, flickering, spiritual, as though they were rising up from the power of a mysterious altar" (15).

The kiln itself is a burning hell over which the kilnman presides. Damian has to be "[r]eturned to earth" after looking into it. Augusta thinks it must look like Hell, and Damian raves "[t]hat's hell sister" in his feverish hallucinations. Sophia imagines that both children are possessed by devils when they are ill (56), and Damian suggests that the lime-kiln man is Satan when he rants, "O Devil don't drop me. That's Satan, you know" (emphasis in the original) (64).

The kilnman behaves oddly, too, sick himself when Sophia and her party arrive. He is "sullen" and "dull" (16). He claims that the sores of smallpox are bug-sores, though on Sophia's second visit he proves himself fully aware of the diseases, including smallpox, which threaten his community. Augusta also says he is "auspicious," which is odd since she is afraid of him (16). Warner further draws attention to his odd "auspiciousness" by having Augusta struggle to find the word. The departure from the kiln also affirms the kilnman's spiritual power. Warner writes, "the little party moved away, slowly and religiously, as they had approached. . . . The fumes must have made us sleepy. [Sophia]

thought, suddenly conscious that there was something odd, something pompous and bewitched about the way they were all behaving" (17).

This powerful, satanic kilnman speaks the critique of class injustice and upper-class hypocrisy that Sophia takes on as her own ideology by the end of the novel. When Sophia visits the kilnman a second time, hoping to become pregnant by him, he is angry rather than sympathetic. He is "dull and proud" at first, knowing that she is a lady and that she has come for reproductive sex: his "sullenness strengthen[s] to wrath" when she hints that he is guilty of killing her children. Sophia, he rails, is a hypocrite to expect sympathy from him over the deaths of children when she has never had any concern over the many working-class children who die--often of poverty-related illnesses--on her estate. "Children do die hereabouts," he rages. "There's the smallpox, and the typhus, and the cholera. There's the low fever, and the quick consumption. And there's starvation. Plenty of things for children to die of" (96). Nor will he provide the sexual/reproductive services Sophia thinks she can demand. If the gentry say about the poor that there are "[p]lenty more children . . . where the dead ones came from," if the poor are expected to "die like cattle" and "breed like cattle too," then, he reasons, "[r]ich and poor can breed alike" (97).

This is the last time the kilnman is physically present in the novel. But Sophia speaks words very like his when she and the other revolutionaries are waiting to be shot. The kilnman's importance to the scene, and to Sophia's political transformation, is first signaled when the jailed revolutionaries wake up suffering from "a raging thirst" (384), as Damian and Augusta had died "begging for water" after their contact with the kilnman. Sophia has come to resemble the kilnman himself: she is "[c]ramped, parched, aching all over," and "sullen and dull-witted" as he is repeatedly described. And she echoes the kilnman's language with her sullenness, like his, strengthened to wrath over hypocrisy. When a priest comes to hear the confession of one of Sophia's comrades but "cannot consent," he says "to the death of a woman" Sophia castigates him for claiming to defend her based on her gender:

Death of a woman! And how many women are dead already, and how many more will be, with your consent and complaisance? Dead in besieged towns, and towns taken by storm. Dead in insurrections and massacres. Dead of starvation, dead of the cholera that follows starvation, dead in childbed, dead in the workhouse and the hospital for venereal diseases. You are not the man to boggle at the death of a woman. (390)

He concedes, and "with a bow" rephrases his objection: he "cannot consent to the death of a lady" (emphasis in the original) (390). As the kilnman had once castigated Sophia's hypocritical concern over the deaths of only upper-class children, she now castigates the priest's concern over the deaths of only upper-class women. Though the kilnman has nothing to do in any physical way with her experiences in Paris, his language, once flung at her, becomes her own and enables her to make an attack, like his, on class-based injustice.

Warner also emphasizes the kilnman's transformative significance by having Sophia recognize him as the initiator of her experiences in France. The night before her journey she pays homage to him: "looked towards the ruddy star on the hillside, and nodded to it briefly, the acknowledgement one resolute rogue might give another. The determination set in her by the kilnman had never wavered or bleached into fantasy" (100). When Sophia decides to travel alone, she remarks that "[o]nly the world was against it. But since her visit to the lime-kiln Sophia was against the world" (101). She remembers "the kilnman and his ruddy signalling star" when she is finally out at sea looking toward the lights of Calais (101). She acknowledges the kilnman as the progenitor of her experiences when she longs to tell Minna her story beginning with "the expedition to the lime-kiln" (146). And when Sophia walks through Paris to find Minna a second time, after an aborted reconciliation with Frederick, she understands her journey as another of the kilnman's making: "[t]he red winking eye of the lime-kiln," she reflects, "had let her off on just such another journey" (206).

Most significantly, from his first appearance to his last, the kilnman exists, specifically as a working-class man, in an always-sexualized field. I would argue that the kilnman functions in the novel as an icon of working-class hypersexuality who serves to prompt Sophia's shift from sexually uninterested (except when it has to do with reproduction) to erotically awake. Contact with first the kilnman, and later Minna, catapults Sophia into sexual curiosity while even Mrs. Hervey's fairly aggressive pursuit of Sophia fails.

Sophia's first mention of the kilnman is erotic, and is an eros based on the class difference between them. As she walks her children to the lime-kiln, she recalls her childhood encounter with a kilnman--not necessarily the same man, but a man in the same job--with great detail about the man's hands and where they touched her:

Sophia's own whooping-cough had been dealt with by the traditional method of being dangled over a lime-kiln to inhale the fumes; she could recollect the exciting experience, and the hands of the man who had lifted her up--hard hairy hands, powdered with lime, the fingers with their broken nails meeting on her bosom under the fur-edged tippet. (5)

Though the memory of a child, this is erotic--a fetishistic response to dirt, hair, work, and animal fur--and not consistent with Sophia's later self-assessment as "frigid to . . . the love of man" (78). Frederick, an upper-class man, might leave her "cold and unamorous," but the kilnman is "exciting" in a way that has largely to do with class difference: Sophia recalls being touched under garments that mark her upper-class status by hands that signify the working-class status of the man who holds her. The kilnman's hands--hard, dirty, bruised and exciting--are also in direct contrast to Frederick's constantly disparaged constitution with its "sloping shoulders" and weaknesses (8).

Sophia's second visit to the kiln is specifically for reproductive sex. She chooses him because she realizes that he is the source of the smallpox that kills the children, but also because she remembers Hannah saying that other women went to the kilnman for sex.

"stealing to him by night, guided by the red glare of his kiln upon the dark hillside" (68). She imagines that she too can "go to him, as those other women do" (94). Here, Sophia begins to identify getting what she wants sexually in terms of behaving like someone outside of her class--a working-class woman.

The trip itself initiates her sexual transformation. Though the kilnman rebuffs her, he affects her sexual imagination, makes her curious about the "strange loves . . . up there on the hill, canopied by the wavering ruddied smoke: loves bitter and violent as the man's furious mind, but in the upleaping of that undaunted lust of a strength which could outface violence and bitterness" (99). The love and sex that can stir Sophia is love and sex that occurs in the politicized realm of work, symbolized by ruddied smoke in this case. It is "strange" and "undaunted" working-class love, especially strong for having to compete with violence and bitterness also connected to class-based oppression.

Sophia is terrified at the man's rage when he rebuffs her, and forgets her lantern in her haste to get away from him. But she ends up thinking the visit a good thing. As her contact with Minna does later, the kilnman's verbal attack returns her to pleasure in her body--a sharp difference from her abandonment of her body in her effort to avoid Mrs. Hervey. She reflects that

the outrage had left her neither shocked nor angry. Indeed it seemed to have done her good: for after the moment of terror had blown off she found herself tautened and stimulated, as though a well-administered slap in the face had roused her from a fainting-fit. Her blood ran living again, her wits revived, her natural vitality, which seemed to have died with the death of her children, returned to her, and once again thinking was a satisfaction, and the use of her limbs a pleasure. (98-9)

Furthermore, Sophia compares working-class women with foxes--the same creatures Sophia idealizes for being free from gender constraints, and that she also associates with Minna. When Sophia is running away from the kilnman, she hears the

laugh of a woman. The "chuckle sound[s] out over the silent field, coarse and freehearted, a sound as kindred to the country night as an owl's tu-whooh, or the barking of a fox" (99). This woman, she also thinks, must be the kilnman's "vixen."

This "vixen" desire, and that of other women who "trudge up to the lime-kiln," and the "strange loves" on the hill in general spark a "prosaic" desire in Sophia. Her practical desire is for a child, but as she leaves the kiln, chased by the vixen's laugh, a "wish, half truly, half ironically felt, arose in her that she could know what manner of love it was that would take one out on a November midnight to lie embracing on the soggy turf" (99). For Warner, the manner of love that would take one out to lie, hunted like a fox, embracing on soggy turf was her love for Valentine. After the night they first went to bed together, Warner wrote in her diary:

it was a bridal of earth and sky, and we spent the morning lying in the hollowed tump of the Five Maries, listening to the wind blowing over our happiness, and talking about torpedoes, and starting up at footsteps. It was so natural to be hunted and intuitive. (70)

Sophia eventually does share this "manner of love" with Minna--a kind of love that can lead one to lie, not on the soggy turf, but on a cold floor. When Minna is ill with emotion, cigars, and liquor, Sophia wants to warm Minna, but "measuring Minna's weight against her own, measuring the distance from floor to bed" decides bed is too far away. Instead, "fetching blankets and eiderdowns she padded Minna round with them, and then laid herself down alongside in a desperate calculated caress" (250).<sup>11</sup>

Parallel to the way in which Warner opposes middle-class sexual "foolishness" (going away with Mrs. Hervey is just a "foolish vision") with Jewish Siren-like sexual compulsion, she relies for the coherence of her plot on reputed working-class

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<sup>11</sup> The reference to an "eiderdown" in this suggestive scene between Minna and Sophia is a private joke as well as further evidence for reading Minna and Sophia's relationship as sexual. See page 75 above.

hypersexuality. In Sophia's mind, behaving like a working-class woman gives her access to a man's sexual/reproductive services. Warner here is making use of literary tropes used by Ellis and Carpenter: working-class sexuality can make a rigidly procreative upper-class woman long to know about the "manner of love" that would make one embrace on cold turf, outside of the patriarchal house--specifically lesbian love for Warner. Working-class sexuality is "violent" "lustful" and "strange" enough to propel an upper-class woman who can't imagine sex with a middle-class woman toward the Jew with whom she can.

### **Caspar**

Caspar is the most disturbing and the most interesting presence in the novel. Warner's references to Caspar in early scenes contribute to the novel's condemnation of the fact that much British wealth comes from the exploitation of colonial and slave labor. Warner also uses Caspar's murder of Minna<sup>12</sup> and Sophia's murder of him to press the political point that divisions across gender, race and nation cripple the struggle to change oppressive relationships between labor and wealth. But Caspar's race is also key to Warner's suggestion of Sophia's lesbianism. Warner places Sophia's primitivist adoration of Caspar's body in opposition to the more hostile racism of others at Blandamer. Her adoring fascination with Caspar functions as one redeeming feature of her character amidst her more general upper-class snobbery and her belief in the rightness of a system in which everyone labors for her benefit. Sophia's adoration of Caspar is thus a hint of compassion that makes Sophia's gradual political transition narratively coherent.

More significantly, Sophia's initial adoration of Caspar also functions as metonymy for her sensual difference from others around her, as well as for her masculine gender orientation, both of which foreshadow her lesbianism. Sophia's eventual rejection of Caspar also has implications for her newly discovered lesbian-erotic life: her effort to expel

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<sup>12</sup> Whether or not Minna dies after Caspar stabs her is left ambiguous.

him because he is no longer entertaining has, as its most important affect, Sophia's loss of "happiness"--the end of her lesbian affair with Minna.

Early references to Caspar contribute to Warner's critique of upper-class English assumptions of superiority. Among Sophia's social responsibilities is "that boy from the West Indies that Uncle Julius [Rathbone] was sending"--"that Caspar, Gaspar, whatever the child was called" (19, 20). From Sophia's view, Caspar warrants some "human[e] consideration" like any other of Sophia's living charges, from bulls to peasants to children to tomatoes (35). But Sophia's refusal to know Caspar's name exactly, or give much thought to his accommodations ("the red dressing-room would do") (20) is her pointed effort to identify publicly his exact, subordinate socio-economic status.

Warner also critiques Britain's economic dependence on money made through imperialist exploitation and the slave trade by showing that Sophia's and Frederick's wealth comes from the Caribbean. Frederick's family sneers at Sophia over her "commercial and suspect" source of wealth--"ownership of an estate in the West Indies" (27). But Frederick also brought a "dowry of debts" to the marriage (27). He and his family may sneer, but his upper-class status, Warner points out, is maintained by the same tainted, imperialist money that is also the source of Sophia's family wealth.

Details Warner includes about this West Indian estate emphasize the fact that if it is from a Caribbean source, Sophia's Aspen-family wealth would have been produced by slave labor through Sophia's childhood, and increased by wage labor in near-slavery conditions after 1833.<sup>13</sup> Uncle Julius is "part-owner and manager of the estate in the West Indies that supplied the Aspen wealth." This estate produces sugar to sell, presumably, as well as edibles for use at Blandamer: twice a year, Rathbone sends "large consignments of guava jelly, molasses, preserved pineapple, and rum" (34). Caspar, Julius's "illegitimate

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<sup>13</sup> See Peter Fryer's Staying Power: The History of Black People in England, chapters 2, 3, 6 and 8 for a discussion of the slave trade and its abolition, sugar production, and English wealth.

son, a half-caste." is fourteen years old when the novel opens in June 1847, which puts his conception approximately a year before the slave trade was officially declared illegal throughout the British Empire. Caspar's mother had been a slave: in Sophia's fantasy she is "an unknown quadroon, passionate and servile her gold ear rings swinging proudly, and the marks of the lash maybe on her back" (40). Before 1833, Caspar would have added his number to the slave-labor force; in 1847, Rathbone treats Caspar as a byproduct of Caribbean sugar production to be used, like molasses, in a way advantageous to the capital-owning class. Rathbone gives instructions concerning Caspar at the beginning of a letter, and then turns, "as though with a waving of the hand . . . to a more detailed account of the guava jellies, etc., which would accompany the boy across the Atlantic" (35). Like the edibles, Caspar should enrich the lives of the ruling class: the edibles will be eaten; Caspar will flesh out the ranks of the managerial class. Julius sends him to Sophia, far away from his "elegant sharp-nosed wife and his three plain daughters," so Sophia can place him "in a moderate establishment where he [can] receive a sound commercial education" without getting "false ideas into his head" (34).

Sophia and Rathbone's expectations about Caspar's proper station in life are part of Warner's critique of English notions of racial superiority. Sophia approves of the shift from slave- to wage-labor in the Caribbean specifically because it perpetuates her wealth and status.<sup>14</sup> She tells Damian and Augusta that "rational humanitarianism . . . forbids that any race should toil as slaves when they would toil more readily as servants" (37).

Warner's critique extends to British education, in service to the upper class, when she writes, with deep sarcasm, that answers to Sophia's advertisements for a school for Caspar "came in hundreds, it seemed as though England's chief industry was keeping boarding schools where religion and tuition had united to put into the heads of bastards all the suitable ideas and no false ones" (35).

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<sup>14</sup> Historians of slavery argue that the slave trade was abolished because it was no longer as profitable as wage-labor and capitalism. See, for instance, Peter Fryer's Staying Power.

But if Warner critiques Sophia's "rational humanitarianism" and her sense of superiority: if she critiques upper-class dependence on wealth produced by exploited labor: if she makes Sophia a mostly reprehensible character in order to press the argument that the working classes must unite against the ruling class across lines of gender, nation and race. Warner also makes primitivism a redeeming quality that marks Sophia's difference from others around her. The narrator's early descriptions of Caspar, given from Sophia's point of view, make him an entertaining spectacle and are designed to show that Sophia's views about race and blood--views shared by Sophia's neighbors and servants--are disrupted when she actually sees Caspar. Sophia expects Caspar to be "no more than a wooly negro," because black blood is stronger than that of the English races. But instead she is enthralled: "before his extreme beauty and grace she felt her mouth opening like that of any bumpkin" (37). She can't believe his "beauty is for her eyes alone," and says to herself "Fools!" when she hears a servant whisper "what a little blackamoor!" (37). She is enchanted by Caspar's athletic abilities as well. He "was always the readier, the more agile, the more daring" than Damian (42). He was "anxious to please," and, when he did well, displayed "his chattering teeth . . . in a smile of pleasure" (41). Though Sophia lacks his "instinct for music," she enjoys Caspar's singing and playing. He sings enchantingly in a "thrilling over-sweet treble . . . as a bird sings, his slender fingers clawing the wires with the pattering agility of a bird's footing" (42-43).

It is tempting, and perhaps somewhat justifiable in light of the sharp satire with which she often treats Sophia, especially in scenes involving Caspar, to read here a critique of Sophia's adoration of Caspar for being a cute primitive--almost monkey-like, naturally musical, athletic and pretty--instead of a brutish one. But I think Warner's point is to differentiate Sophia from others at Blandamer who think of him as exactly monkey-like and who despise him for it. While Sophia appreciates him, others "must need call out some achievement, as people prod monkeys at a fair; and then, angered by the brilliant response, sulk, grumble and belittle it" (41). The rector derides Caspar for not knowing his

Catechism; then derides his effort to learn it as "very glib, remarkable quickness" but inadequate, as "such facility . . . is not altogether desirable. Light come, light go, you know." In response, Sophia amuses herself by taking the rector to the conservatory and apologizing for being able to offer only "a bouquet of her gaudiest and most delicate tropical plants" because "there are no violets left." She further enjoys the fact he doesn't "perceive the insinuation" (42).

Warner's critique in these scenes is not for Sophia, but rather for those whose hatred for Caspar is more overtly hostile. When the narrator reports that it "was no more than natural" for "the child [to] be viewed askance because he was coloured and a stranger" Warner is, in her usual style, being sarcastic about Sophia's household's idea of "natural" racism. Sophia--perhaps the only time in the novel--is approved of because she sees, while the servants and the neighborhood disparage "a little blackamoor," that Caspar "was not more black than vivid, not more of a stranger than of a phoenix" (41).

Warner also makes Sophia's response to Caspar metonymic for her masculinity, thus using him to foreshadow her lesbianism. Though Sophia is generally obsessed with managing the reproduction on her estate to perpetuate status-quo wealth and class relations, she finds herself pondering, with "unexpected approval" her Uncle Rathbone's behavior--the "scrapes, financial and amatory," one of which is the "scrape" that produced Caspar. Sophia's approval, the narrator reports, comes from the "masculine toleration" she inherited from her father. Furthermore, Sophia imagines Caspar's mother in sensual orientaling detail suggesting that Sophia's erotic interest is in line with Rathbone's. What Warner represents, here, is less "approval" of Rathbone than desire in common with him for a woman of mixed race with limited power to defend herself against uninvited sexual advances. This, in turn, links Sophia's fantasy about Caspar's mother with her erotic response to Minna: Caspar's mother's victimization foreshadows Minna's tale of her suffering in a Lithuanian pogrom.

Warner also links Sophia's fantasy about freedom from the constraints of gender to

Caspar's appearance. Just before Caspar arrives, the narrator reports that Sophia fantasizes living free from gender constraints while visiting Trebennick, and that she savors those fantasies by reinvoking them at will in the midst of her mundane tasks. This fantasy is a private one of "darkness stranger than any star has pierced:" it is a "personal darkness, an unknown aspect of Sophia as truly hers as one may call the mysterious sheltering darkness of one's eyelid one's own" (37).

Immediately following this passage, Caspar makes his first appearance. Sophia thinks "the boy who stepped from the carriage and walked toward her up the sunlit steps might have come, not from any surmisable country, but from a star" (37). Warner suggests by this juxtaposition that Sophia's own "darkness" is not so strange as to be impenetrable, and that this "star" from which Caspar is imagined to have come is perhaps the one that can illuminate Sophia's "stranger darkness."

Caspar is also the first in a trio--including the kilnman and Minna--who disrupt Sophia's routine, change her point of view, wake up her sensuality and sensual curiosity. Being of the party listening to Caspar play his guitar, Sophia is "caressed by the outer wave-lengths of a world into which she could not enter: and while the music lasted she would stay, gazing at the picture the children made--the picture of two white cherubs and a black" (43). As she is later by Minna and the kilnman, Sophia is spellbound, caressed and warmed and loosened by Caspar. With Caspar, the narrator reports, "something came into her life which supplanted all her disciplined and voluntary efficiency, a kind of unbinding spell which worked upon her lullingly as the scent of some opiate flower" (43).

Sophia's response to Caspar even suggests that there is an affinity between Damian and Sophia based on mutual homosexuality. Before Caspar arrives, Sophia worries that Caspar will "tease Augusta and corrupt Damian." Why she fears that Caspar will affect her son and her daughter differently is unexplained, but both words suggest sexual affects, and "corrupt" carries a specifically homosexual meaning. Warner elaborates this suggestion by suggesting that Damian does fall in love with Caspar. From the beginning of the novel,

Sophia worries over Damian's failure to be properly masculine. He is uninterested in hunting and carpentry, though he is given guns and tools. Despite having been given a pony, he is "fast becoming that ignoble kind of rider who knows how not to fall off" (7). While a wide patch of green is cleared for him to play sports with the local boys on, he becomes an idol rather than a leader among his peers. Sophia is infuriated when a boy shows up with the gift of a hawk that Damian had been unable to catch for himself (7). And Damian seems to be in love with Caspar from the minute Caspar arrives. While Augusta smiles prettily when she first sees Caspar, following instructions, Damian "had both stared and been shy" (38). About Caspar's effort to learn Catechism, Warner suggests provocatively that Caspar and Damian do private things together: "Damian only was privy to what followed" (42). Warner also writes that Caspar's music alone is enough to "birdlime" Damian (42)<sup>15</sup> and that Damian weeps inconsolably (48) when he isn't permitted to say goodbye to Caspar.

More significantly, Sophia feels affinity with Damian over his feelings for Caspar: just as Caspar stirs Sophia, "it was obvious that this dusky piece of romance had stirred [Damian] deeply" (38). In response, Sophia is, for the first and last time in the novel,

moved towards her son not as a child but as a companion. His admiration corroborated hers, sanctioned it almost: she was knit to Damian not by the common bond that tethers a mother to her child, but by the first intimation of that stronger link that time might forge, the close tremulous excited dependence of the woman upon the male she has brought forth. (38)

It is possible, here, that Sophia approves Damian's love of Caspar because it is like her own love of Caspar; it is possible as well that she approves Damian's love because it is homoerotic, like what she will later feel for Minna. Sophia even compares Minna with

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<sup>15</sup> Warner also uses the word "birdlimed" to describe the way in which a young woman affects an older man with whom she becomes lovers in the short story "The Foregone Conclusion."

Caspar: she realizes she is taking Minna to see the revolution and to dinner "as though she were a child to be given a treat--as though she were Caspar" (160).

The end of the novel also makes Caspar central to both Sophia's political and her lesbian stories. Caspar is the tool by which Warner turns the violence of Sophia's own beliefs back at her and thus chastens Sophia out of the remnants of her solidarity with the upper class. This links the death of Caspar with the disappearance of Sophia's possibility to enjoy sensuality. Sophia literally expels lesbian love from her life when she also tries to expel Caspar, and thus inadvertently contributes to the development of the situation in which Caspar kills Minna. Here, Warner makes the point that race, like gender, is used to divide potential allies against ruling-class oppressors.

In the last third of the novel when Sophia and Minna are struggling to feed themselves in revolutionary Paris, Caspar shows up, having run away from Trebennick, with outgrown clothes, adolescent ugliness and interminable hunger. Most irritatingly to Sophia, he intrudes on their privacy. At one point Sophia literally pushes him out of their apartment and slams the door in his face (317). Every effort of Sophia's to push him out, though, rebounds and leads inexorably toward tragedy. Because she pushes him out of the apartment, he spends nights with Madam Coton, who feeds his jealousy of Minna until it becomes full blown anti-semitic hate. (This is doubly ironic, since Minna defends Caspar to Sophia from the minute he shows up.) Sophia can't find a commercial school for Caspar with no money to pay up front, so she hands responsibility for his maintenance to Frederick, who has taken her money. He, in turn, enlists Caspar in the gardes mobiles, the government forces against whom the revolutionaries will fight in June, 1848.

Eventually Sophia's many efforts to keep Caspar in his place--the last gasp of her partially inadvertent solidarity with the upper-class--deprive her of "the only happiness she has ever known:" Caspar leaps the barricade behind which Sophia and Minna are fighting and thrusts his bayonet into Minna's breast, yelling "Drab! . . . Jewess! This is the end of you" (382). Without hesitation, Sophia calmly shoots him in the head before herself being

dragged away with the other revolutionaries to be shot herself.

Critics who focus on the lesbianism of the novel have criticized this ending for its melodrama. Terry Castle calls it "a problem [that] cannot be denied" (87) though she also tries to explain the implausibility of the ending as a characteristic of lesbian fiction:

Precisely because it is motivated by a yearning for that which is, in a cultural sense, implausible--the subversion of male homosocial desire--lesbian fiction also characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as "realistic" in surface detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical, or utopian tendency. The more insistently it gravitates toward euphoric resolution, moreover, the more implausible--in every way--it may seem. (88)

The "problem" with the novel, Castle concludes, "is not so much that it forfeits plausibility at the end but that it forfeits plausibility from the start" (88).

Julie Abraham calls the ending of Summer Will Show "a failure of nerve" and argues that Warner, like many other writers of lesbian fiction, couldn't end the novel with a lesbian couple intact. Wendy Mulford argues that the writing sinks to bathos at the end of the novel (119) and that the end is "tinny realism" (121). Thomas Foster argues that the "plot twist" at the end "strains the novel's plausibility" (553).

The end of Summer Will Show is unquestionably melodramatic. But it is not, I argue, a cop-out--a reading encouraged by placing Minna at the center of Sophia's transformation. Rather, the end is Warner's utterly coherent propagandistic warning. Because Sophia cannot incorporate Caspar and racism into her class analysis soon enough to prevent tragedy, she suffers the loss of Minna, the source, as she says, of everything that has ever made her happy. Warner seems to be saying that lesbian love doesn't exist in a vacuum, that you can't have a revolution in love without taking responsibility for the past--family lands, houses, and prosperity based on slavery. Also, if you leave the racial other, who might well be one's own nephew, to be cared for by the right wing, he's very likely to be turned against you. As Thomas Foster argues, "Summer Will Show suggests

the possibility of feminist intervention around issues of sexuality and pleasure in the marxist narrative of revolution, while at the same time it demonstrates the need for women's stories of liberation and narratives of same-sex desire to come into contact with narratives of class, race and colonialism, beyond their own borders" (554).

This combination of politics with depictions of lesbianism in Summer Will Show clearly reveals the paradox of Warner's simultaneous critique of, and reliance on, primitivist stereotypes. Warner's protagonist, Sophia, makes a political transformation from landowning aristocrat--a snob who believes that her superior place in the world is a result of her superior ability to prudently husband all her creatures and resources--to communist activist; this political transformation is simultaneous with a sexual transformation from "frigid" (78) wife to sexually-awake lesbian. Warner attributes these changes to Sophia's contact with the working-class lime-kiln man, Jewish Minna, and Caribbean Caspar. For Warner herself--a middle-class white woman--it was possible to engage in lesbian sex and emerge into a lesbian identity with Ackland, another middle-class white woman, specifically in the context of activism against injustice.<sup>16</sup> In her fiction, though, Warner seems to rely on contact with working-class and dark-skinned figures as tropes of access to lesbian sexuality for her white upper-class character for whom the idea of lesbianism is "intolerable" (75).

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<sup>16</sup> Sophia doesn't use this word, but Warner called herself and Ackland lesbians in her correspondence with Ackland. See I'll Stand by You (11).

## Six: Jezebel and Sapphira: Willa Cather's Monstrous Sapphists<sup>1</sup>

Willa Cather's Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), the last work considered here, has obvious differences from The Waves and Summer Will Show, including the fact that its author and setting are American rather than British. But Sapphira is as fully involved with Sapphic Primitivism as a mode of lesbian representation as the novels discussed above. The Waves and Summer Will Show reflect Virginia Woolf's and Sylvia Townsend Warner's reliance on figurations of blackness to represent lesbianism. For Woolf and Warner, this sexual use of figurations of blackness takes place, perhaps paradoxically, in the context of anti-imperialist national critiques. Sapphira and the Slave Girl reflects a similar reliance on figurations of blackness to represent lesbianism, but in the context of a more ambiguously critical depiction of nation and nation building. Sapphira is set in an antebellum Virginia peopled with enslaved African Americans, slave-owning whites, and abolitionists. The central character is a white woman obsessed by the bodies of the black women she owns. Cather critiques unequal power relations in slavery, especially in relationships between white and black women. But she also looks back to the antebellum south nostalgically and writes an alliance between white and black women characters to explore the possibility of authoritarian, erotic relations between white women.

My argument, here, is meant to complement the claims of many writers who, in the last ten years, have rescued Cather's novel from oblivion by analyzing it as an exploration of relations between white and black women in slavery. But compounding the problem of Cather's nostalgic treatment of slavery, I want to argue, is her use of figurations of blackness to suggest, where she doesn't name, homoerotic relations. Cather's primitivism, here, reflects the interdependence of figures of sexuality and race discussed by cultural critics and scholars of literary modernism, but with an additional specificity about lesbianism and sexological sciences of homosexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was inspired by Lisa Marcus's analysis of Sapphira and the Slave Girl in "The Pull of Race and Blood and Memory": American Narrative, 1850-1940."

That the homoerotic presence is unnamed in Sapphira warns us to make more, rather than less of it. In her often-quoted essay about realism and fiction, "The Novel Démeublé," Cather writes:

whatever is felt upon the pages without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (Not Under Forty 50).<sup>2</sup>

This statement has encouraged queer readings of Cather's work: "The thing not named" echoes the Oscar Wilde's reference to homosexuality as the "love that dared not speak its name" (Hogan and Hudson 576).<sup>3</sup> Cather's belief in the aesthetic value of the unnamed in fiction, combined with her familiarity with Wilde's work and his trial,<sup>4</sup> insist that the unnamed in Sapphira be attended to carefully.

### **Willa Cather and the Critical Response**

Over the last hundred years, critics have paid varying degrees of attention to Willa Cather and her work.<sup>5</sup> She was well-received during her lifetime, fell into near obscurity in

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon O'Brien argues that in "The Novel Démeublé" Cather writes as both "a modernist writer endorsing allusive, suggestive art and inviting the reader's participation in the creation of literary meaning" as well as a "lesbian writer forced to disguise or to conceal the emotional source of her fiction, reassuring herself that the reader fills the absence in the text by intuiting the subterranean, unwritten subtext" ("The Thing Not Named" 577).

<sup>3</sup> Wilde's used this phrase--a quote from a poem by his lover Lord Alfred Douglas--during his 1895 trial for gross indecency between males (Hogan and Hudson 576).

<sup>4</sup> Cather wrote about Wilde's drama and poetry, also making reference to his trial, in 1894 and 1895. See Kingdom of Art 387-393.

<sup>5</sup> Major publications include April Twilights (1903), The Troll Garden (1905), Alexander's Bridge (1912), O Pioneer's! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), My Antonia (1918), and Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920), One of Ours (1922), A Lost Lady (1923), The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1926), Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), Shadows on the Rock (1931), Obscure Destinies (1932), Lucy Gayheart (1935).

the two decades after her death in 1947, and has been the object of steadily increasing attention since the early 1970s. Her first novels Alexander's Bridge (1912) and O Pioneers! (1913) attracted positive reviews and widespread attention (Murphy 2). Her fifth novel One of Ours (1922), which first made her the subject of controversy, was criticized sharply for its depictions of the war, but also won a Pulitzer Prize. Through the 1930s, critics on the left railed against the escapist and nostalgic qualities of her fiction, which made it, Granville Hicks charged in 1933, antimodern and politically conservative.<sup>6</sup> But also in the 1930s and 1940s critics began to write of Cather as a major American writer. By the end of her life, Cather lived well off book sales, though her later works have consistently earned less praise than her early works. Shortly after her death in 1947, several partial and full biographies of Cather appeared.<sup>7</sup> These were followed by relative silence<sup>8</sup> until new biographical and critical works began to appear again in the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

By the mid-1980s, John Murphy could introduce his collection Critical Essays on Willa Cather by saying triumphantly that she had "survived her season of neglect" (1). And from the perspective of the end of the 1990s, Cather seems to have done better than merely "survive." She is described as "one of America's most important writers" by an anonymous critic on the cover of the 1988 paperback edition of Sharon O'Brien's

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Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), and The Old Beauty and Others (1948).

<sup>6</sup> Cather's collection of essays Not Under Forty is her response to some of those who attacked her nostalgia as a mark of political conservatism. With the title of the collection, she accepts the challenge of those who would denigrate her for preferring the old to the new artistically and socially. See Carlin 13-17 for further discussion of this critique and Cather's response.

<sup>7</sup> Including those by Mildred Bennet (1951), E. K. Brown and Leon Edel (1953), Edith Lewis (1953), and Elizabeth Sergeant (1953).

<sup>8</sup> The exception is Mildred Bennet's work on the board of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Education Foundation in Red Cloud Nebraska, and on the Willa Cather Pioneer Newsletter.

<sup>9</sup> These later biographies include those by James Woodress (1970, 1987), Marion Marsh Brown and Ruth Crone (1971, 1980), Sharon O'Brien (1987), and Hermione Lee (1989).

biography. Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice. In the 1990s, My Antonia and O Pioneers! have been made into television movies (Lindemann 8, 144n), and Cather has repeatedly been a subject of popular journalism. In the New Yorker, for instance, John Gregory Dunne recounts details from Cather's life to emphasize the tragedy of the murder of Brandon Teena, a transgendered teenager from Nebraska. Dunne relies on readers' affection for Cather's writing, as well as on our familiarity with her life story, reminding us that she, too, cross-dressed and called herself William.<sup>10</sup>

In academic settings, Cather is also being taken increasingly seriously. There are several trends among Cather scholars.<sup>11</sup> From Mildred Bennet's The World of Willa Cather (1951), to James Woodress's Willa Cather: A Literary Life (1987) and Mary Ruth Ryder's Willa Cather and Classical Myth (1990) many critics have focused on the ways in which Cather's work is fundamentally about art and the role of the artist in society (Carlin 8).<sup>12</sup> Other critics emphasize Cather's engagement with political and social issues of her day, and/or with modernist literary concerns and aesthetics.<sup>13</sup> Significantly for my purposes, for instance, Hermione Lee takes up Cather's modernist primitivism. About The

<sup>10</sup> Another instance of Cather's presence in popular journalism is Joan Acocella's 1995 article "Cather and the Academy," also published in the New Yorker. Acocella offers a sharp critique of "political readings" (70) of Cather's work, feminist scholarship in particular.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Carlin argues that among Cather scholars there are four main academic reading communities: "those concerned with art, style and form in Cather's fiction; those who attempt to place Cather historically and thematically in the 'main currents' of twentieth-century American literature; feminist critics; and lesbian feminist scholars" (8).

<sup>12</sup> See also Joyce Macdonald's The Stuff of our Forebears, David Stouck's Willa Cather's Imagination, and Marilyn Arnold's "The Allusive Cather."

<sup>13</sup> These writers respond to critics such as Granville Hicks who argues that Cather is antimodern, and more recent critics such as Hugh Kenner who ignores her in his 1984 essay on Modernism. See, for instance, Susan Rosowski's The Voyage Perilous, Phyllis Rose's "Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather," Jo Ann Middleton's Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique, Guy Reynolds' Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire, Hermione Lee's Willa Cather: Double Lives, Marilee Lindemann's Willa Cather: Queering America, Paul Petrie's "'Skulking Escapist' vs. 'Radical Editor,'" and Elizabeth Ammons "Cather and the New Canon: 'The Old Beauty' and the Issue of Empire."

Professor's House, "published at the height of the modernist movement." Lee writes that Cather's "recognition of a primitive, instinctual self brings Cather extraordinarily close to some of her contemporaries" in their search to find enduring truths "in the instinctual, the primitive, and the mythological" (256).<sup>14</sup>

Cather's rise in stature in both popular and academic settings is primarily a result of feminist critical writing and agitation over canonical boundaries that began in the 1970s. Feminist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s focused on Cather's depictions of women characters and on her manipulations of conventions about gender and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Specifically lesbian-feminist analyses of the 1970s and 1980s often focused on the presence or absence of encoded lesbian themes or figures in Cather's fiction.<sup>16</sup> Following the publication of Sharon O'Brien's 1984 essay "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer," and O'Brien's 1987 biography, most scholars have taken Cather's lesbianism as a given.<sup>17</sup> O'Brien makes an excellent case for calling Cather a lesbian writer based on an analysis of early 1890s letters to Louise Pound, on whom Cather had a passionate crush when the two were in college in Lincoln. Careful to note that Cather would not have called herself a lesbian because the word was not in common use in the

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<sup>14</sup> Lee cites Phyllis Rose, here, who discusses the similarity between Cather and other modernists' interest in myth, heroism, and fractures with the past.

<sup>15</sup> Notably, Carolyn Heilbrun's Reinventing Womanhood, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's No Man's Land especially vol. 2 Sexchanges, Ellen Moers' Literary Women, Sharon O'Brien's "The Unity of Willa Cather's 'Two-Part Pastoral': Passion in O Pioneers!" and Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice, Susan Rosowski's "Willa Cather's Women" and The Voyage Perilous, Judith Fryer's Felicitous Space, Janice P. Stout's Strategies of Reticence, and Hermione Lee's Willa Cather: Double Lives.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Jane Rule's Lesbian Images, Sharon O'Brien's Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice, Timothy Dow Adams' "My Gay Antonia: The Politics of Willa Cather's Lesbianism," Catherine Stimpson's "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," Bonnie Zimmerman's "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," Joanna Russ's "To Write 'Like a Woman': Transformations of Identity in the Work of Willa Cather," Judith Fetterley's "My Antonia, Jim Burden and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer," John H. Flannigan's "Issues of Gender and Lesbian Love: Goblins in 'The Garden Lodge,'" and Deborah Lambert's "The Defeat of a Hero."

<sup>17</sup> Joan Acocella, an exception, strongly objects.

1890s. O'Brien claims that Cather's "self-conscious awareness that her involvement with Louise Pound placed her in a suspect category sharply distinguishes her from women who enjoyed romantic same-sex friendships earlier in the century" (132). More recently, Marilee Lindemann seconds O'Brien's claim, arguing that Cather's use of the word "unnatural" to describe her friendship with Pound, reflects a "self-conscious sense of the deviant nature of the relationship" that "places it on the modern side of the line historians of sexuality have drawn between romantic friendship and lesbianism" (19).<sup>18</sup>

In what is both a 1990s continuation of feminist and lesbian-feminist scholarship but also a new area of study, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and Marilee Lindemann, among others, have contributed queer-theoretical analyses of Cather's work. These critics, unlike many of their predecessors in Cather studies, stay clear of biographical readings, interested instead in Cather's literary treatment of sex and gender as key aspects of her engagement with main currents of twentieth-century American literature and culture. Butler, for instance, argues that one of the persistent features of Cather's texts is "the destabilization of gender and sexuality" through her use of names (143).<sup>19</sup>

Additionally in the 1980s and 1990s, a handful of critics influenced by studies of race in America or Toni Morrison's discussion of Sapphira in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1993) have begun to talk about race and ethnicity in Cather novels.<sup>20</sup> Morrison uses Sapphira as a key example of the ways in which white

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<sup>18</sup> As is well known, Cather destroyed most of her letters in the later part of her life. Also, in her will she prohibited direct quotation from any surviving letters. Sharon O'Brien and Marilee Lindemann paraphrase in discussing the letters. (See O'Brien 130-4, Lindemann 17-31, 146n.) Both Lindemann and O'Brien make it clear that "unnatural" is Cather's word to describe her relationship with Pound.

<sup>19</sup> Butler's essay deals with My Antonia, "Tommy the Unsentimental" and "Paul's Case."

<sup>20</sup> See Minrose Gwin's Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature (1985), Katrina Irving's "Displacing Homosexuality: The Use of Ethnicity in Willa Cather's My Antonia (1990), Deborah Carlin's Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading (1992), Lisa Marcus's "'The Pull of Race and Blood and Memory': American Narrative, 1850-1940" (1995), Walter Benn Michaels' Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism (1995), Naomi Morgenstern's "'Love is Homo-sickness': Nostalgia and Lesbian Desire in Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1996) and Marilee

American writers have employed figurations of blackness. Until Morrison's book, very few critics had addressed Cather's treatment of race. Deborah Carlin argues that "race has frequently been an unspoken issue in criticism of Cather's fiction because . . . Cather's racial sensibilities are likely to strike the modern reader as less than enlightened, to say the least" (150). Since Morrison's book, however, there has been both a small flurry of interest in Sapphira and also an increased willingness to discuss the ways in which Cather incorporates racially as well as ethnically marked characters in her other works.

In my examination of Cather's last novel, I am concerned most with the critics who discuss race and sexuality together. In Willa Cather: Queering America, Lindemann productively takes up both Cather's lesbianism and her engagement with questions of race, ethnicity, and the politics of nation building. Lindemann examines Cather's writing for the work it does toward simultaneously shaping the constructions "queer" and "American." In some novels, Cather seems to police the boundaries of citizenship and identify only specific, unqueer kinds of bodies as assimilable. In other works, Cather resists boundaries, making room for varieties of queer figures within the concept of citizen. About Sapphira in particular, Lindemann argues, "in Sapphira's white aging female disabled body, Cather figures the paranoid subjectivity of a nation of free and equal people that had systematically denied the freedom, equality and personhood of women and African Americans (135). The novel

allegorizes the making of America as inherently and inevitably terroristic, a process in which [queer] bodily differences . . . whether they are differences of race, sex, gender or physical ability provoke fear and loathing rather than cultural dynamism and a creative instability successfully negotiated through love and translation. (136)

In "'The Pull of Race and Blood and Memory': American Narrative, 1850-1940."

Lisa Marcus discusses the ways Cather's earliest fiction and poetry and her last novel  


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 Lindemann's Willa Cather: Queering America (1999).

address her Southern heritage and reflect the intersections of race and gender in American history. Marcus argues that by writing herself as narrator into the end of Sapphira, Cather implicates herself in the problematic genealogy of white Southern womanhood" (129). Also in Sapphira, Cather "explores the possibilities of writing a plot of white female desire" through the African American character Nancy, thus displacing lesbian desire onto the body of the black woman (123). Lindemann agrees that "desire is displaced onto the body of the black female (Nancy)" (169n).<sup>21</sup> But Lindemann also shows that it is "grossly reductive" (134) to understand Sapphira through the masquerade model that writers such as Judith Fetterly have used to explain how Cather negotiated "the dilemma of the lesbian writer" (Fetterley 43).

I seek to build on the work of Morrison, Lindemann, and Marcus by focusing on Jezebel as an icon of savagery in Cather's evocations of lesbianism in Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940). Judith Butler argues that "substitution is a condition for [the] sexuality" figured in Cather's texts (162). This, she argues, is the

historically specific consequence of a prohibition on a certain naming, a prohibition against speaking the name of this love that nevertheless and insistently speaks through the very displacements that that prohibition produces. (162)

Butler is not using what Lindemann calls a masquerade model here, talking about lesbianism as a presence encoded or disguised by the use of tropes such as giving her narrators male names.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Butler describes substitution as a characteristic of lesbian representations in Cather's work. I am arguing that in Sapphira, Cather substitutes savagery for lesbian erotics, and figures white women's sexual desire as the product of

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<sup>21</sup> Naomi Morgenstern writes, more generally, that "Cather often used racially othered people, if not ancient and 'vanished' ones to write stories of sexual awakening" (191n).

<sup>22</sup> Julie Abraham also discusses the limitations of masquerade models of lesbian representation in Are Girls Necessary. See pages 23-26.

violent, controlling relationships between white and black.

### **Cather and Modernist Primitivism**

All of Willa Cather's work involves a strong element of primitivism that marks her as a modernist engaged, as were many others, in Orientalist and primitivizing fantasy. At the mythic centers of her novels, from first to last, are figures representing formidable human and natural force—force that is timeless, essential and original, as well as variously dangerous, erotic or pure. Supremely creative, such force pushes nations and opera singers up out of prairie and rock;<sup>23</sup> supremely destructive as well, it brings death and ruin to miscreants and heroes alike. Such force can be thwarted, colonized, or vanquished in any single manifestation, and Cather's novels mourn its loss in the nostalgic manner for which she is known. But her works taken as a whole also testify to its continuous, triumphant and terrifying presence.

In Cather's first published novel, Alexander's Bridge, primitive erotic force exists most prominently as an incessantly rushing, wild, violent river "with mists and clouds always battling about it" (17). Bartley Alexander's bridges seem to evade this force. They are brilliantly engineered, beautifully executed "slender skeleton[s]," "delicate as a cobweb" arching over the river (17, 117). But even before his last bridge buckles, killing Bartley and a group of workers, the river represents, "death: the wearing away of things under the impact of physical forces which men direct but never circumvent or diminish" (117-8).

Bartley himself is a powerful human force--a sexually vigorous and fantastically successful engineer from whom his teachers expect "something extraordinary" (7): he was an exciting, "powerfully equipped nature" with a "force" teachers only rarely encounter

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<sup>23</sup> Cather's representations of force participate in what Deborah Carlin calls "the heroic myth of national destiny" (7). For more discussion of Cather's works as they relate to national identity, see also Marilee Lindemann's Willa Cather: Queering America, Walter Benn Michaels' Our America, Joseph Uργο's Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration, and Guy Reynolds' Willa Cather in Context.

(17). Bartley's force is ultimately as corrupt, though, as his bridge turns out to be. If Bartley is a powerful natural force, he also has a "weak spot where some day strain [will] tell." "a big crack zigzagging from top to bottom" that will result in "a crash and clouds of dust" (12). This weakness is his passionate, sensuous, youthful self, the "most dangerous of companions" (41, 69).<sup>24</sup>

Timeless, immutable force like that of the river, and the corrupted/corrupting force in Bartley, are the myths around which all Cather's novels revolve. Such force is in the soil, the rocky canyons, and the red grass that pioneers in many of her novels do battle against. The land in O Pioneers! is a "wild thing" (20, 21, 118) marked as primitive by being outside time--its "history" doesn't begin until Alexandra Bergson sets her face "toward it with love and yearning" (65). It has a "fierce strength," a "savage kind of beauty," (15) and a "free spirit" untamed since it emerged from the waters in the geologic ages.

Mythic, heroic, human force moves pioneers to do battle against such powerful land. Those who succeed are those most like the land in nature: wild, powerful, vigorous. Alexandra's ability to finally bend the land to her will is the result of her strong affinity with it. From the beginning of the novel, she feels her own heart hiding among the other "wild things" "[u]nder the long shaggy ridges" (71), and feels "in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (204). By the end of the novel, the narrator presents Alexandra's body itself as virile, earthly vigor--a force that pushes up "yellow wheat," "rustling corn," and "shining youth"--while the land becomes the domesticated, vanquished, maternal body that will eventually take Alexandra "into its bosom" (308). Alexandra is successful as a farmer because she is vital like the land, close enough to it in nature to be moved by it and

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<sup>24</sup> Marilee Lindemann argues that Bartley's sexuality--his childless marriage, and his affair with Hilda--exemplifies sexuality pathologized by turn-of-the-century Progressive discourses of sexual and racial hygiene. Bartley's sexuality, like the non-reproductive sexuality of the masturbating schoolboy, and the overproductive-sexuality of the immigrant or poor woman, is of the kind likely to lead to the deterioration of the race (50-3).

to coax it into new forms.

In The Professor's House, Cather celebrates pure, originary, potent, human creativity and mourns its vulnerability to ubiquitous, corrupt, modern materialism. Tom Outland is the novel's unsullied primitive.<sup>25</sup> In Washington D.C., he sees thousands of human beings turned into clerks "all more or less" the same, "stream[ing] out of the Treasury building and the War and Navy . . . like people in slavery, who ought to be free" (211). In contrast, Tom is raw human energy. He is chaste, brilliantly inventive, and a natural intelligence rather than a schooled one: "well fitted by nature and early environment to help [St. Peter] with his work on the Spanish Adventurers" (39). Tom's purity remains unsullied because he dies young before his brilliant invention begins to draw material rewards.

In Death Comes for the Archbishop, the untamed New Mexican landscape is a vital force, variously wild, terrible, and sensuously beautiful or fragrant.<sup>26</sup> The wind of the desert has the rejuvenating power. Bishop Latour thinks, to "make him a boy again" every morning (275). This power is presented nostalgically in the novel: it exists "only on the bright edges of the world" and will "disappear from the whole earth in time, perhaps" destroyed by the "moisture of plowed land, the heaviness of labour and growth and grain-bearing" (275). But some of the vitality of the New Mexican desert also promises to thrive indefinitely. Through a hole in a rock, Bishop Latour hears "a great underground river . . . perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock . . . a great flood moving with majesty and power" (130). That it is "antediluvian" suggests that it is an originary force: that it is so hidden and powerful suggests that it is protected from the kind of corruptions that change other aspects of the

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<sup>25</sup> See Maynard Fox's "Two Primitives" for a discussion of Tom Outland as primitive. Walter Benn Michaels also argues that the bond between the three men isolated on the Blue Mesa in this novel represent national purity (47-48).

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, pages 130, 182, and 207.

New Mexican desert.

This force, ubiquitous in Cather's work, is variously gendered. In early journal articles, Cather champions forceful, heroic, sexually-pure masculinity as a necessary component of both football and poetry: both "appeal to the crude savage instincts of men" (KA 212). If the nation loses "brute force, or an admiration for brute force" such as that required by football, poetry and art will be "forever dead among us," she warns. Football forwards the causes of art and poetry because it is "manly," "purifies the living of young men," is not conducive to "unnatural excitement," and opposes "tendencies toward effeminacy," "chappieism," "dissipation" and "soft-handed" and "soft-headedness" (212-13).<sup>27</sup>

Even in women characters, power is also often expressed as a degree of masculinity: the gender ambiguity thus created is a source of the homoerotic suggestiveness of many Cather works. In the opening scene of O Pioneers!, for instance, Alexandra Bergson is a "tall, strong girl" who walks "rapidly and resolutely" (6). She wears a man's coat "as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her: carried it like a young soldier." She hurls "a glance of Amazonian fierceness" at a man on the street who comments on her hair (8). Her dependence on Carl to get Emil's kitten down from a pole in this scene seems contradictory at first, but Carl's slimness and vulnerability further define Alexandra's masculinity. He darts, head down, while Alexandra strides resolutely: he is "tall" and "slight" in contrast to her "tall" and "strong" (9). These ambiguously gendered characters and the chaste love that develops between them contribute a generally queer texture to the novel. This in turn provides a sympathetic context for the more specifically lesbian eros Cather writes into her descriptions of the wild landscape that becomes fertile under

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<sup>27</sup> Consistent with this idea that creative force is masculine, Lindemann points out that in Cather's 1925 preface to a collection of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories, Cather's use of the generic he "makes a linguistic 'man' out of Jewett" (93). Cather's discussion of Jewett's poetics "cross-dresses [Jewett] and cloaks her art of sympathy and suggestion in terms that define it as a masculine achievement" (93-4).

Alexandra's hands, and finally takes her "into its bosom" (308).<sup>28</sup>

Cather's most well-known character, Antonia, is also ambiguously gendered, powerful in her maternal, reproductive capacity by the end of the novel, but with a degree of masculinity early on that foreshadows her success as a pioneer. During the time that she works the farm with her brother, Jim Burden finds her "disagreeable" because she eats "noisily . . . like a man" and yawns and stretches at the table (120). She is also "too proud of her strength," and provokes "farmhands around the country [to joke] in a nasty way" by doing "chores a girl ought not to do" (121). Later, a more mature Jim reinterprets Antonia's physical vigor as both feminine and erotic. As in O Pioneers!, Antonia's ambiguous femininity queers the novel. This in turn supplements the lesbian-erotic suggestion of the novel explicated by critics who take the masculine voice of the narrator as a displacement of lesbian erotics.<sup>29</sup>

Powerful femininity, unlike powerful masculinity, is also often more corrosive than productive. As Carl puts it about Marie in O Pioneers!:

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<sup>28</sup> Landscape is often homoerotic in Cather's work. As the once-wild land in O Pioneers! takes the Amazonian Alexandra "into its bosom" in a lesbian-erotically suggestive way, in My Antonia Jim and Antonia "slid[e] down straw-stacks . . . climbing up the yellow mountains over and over, and slipping down the smooth side into soft piles of chaff" (172). Marilee Lindemann argues that in both these novels, the prairie is a "sit[e] of youthful eroticism" where "pastoral language evokes the fantasy of a space that is erotically charged but also precarious and vaguely threatening" (28).

Similarly, in Death Comes for the Archbishop, the New Mexican desert is sensuous, feminine, threatening, and a place where love between men can flourish. The cave in which Bishop Latour hears the antediluvian river is a vaginal "orifice," entered between "two great stone lips, slightly parted" (127) complete with an os-like second opening, smaller and oval, that seems to lead into another cavern. Bishop Latour is "struck by a reluctance, and extreme distaste for the place," which he thinks "fetid," "disagreeable" and "rank" (127, 129). Latour's anxiety over feminine sexuality, as well as his naivete about why he is anxious, contributes to Cather's perhaps homophobic depiction of his unconsciously homoerotic love for Father Vaillant. But simultaneous with Latour's anxious response is the narrator's sensuous depiction of New Mexico in general—including the lips of the cave, strong scents, dry heat, reviving air, and hidden spots of wet, life-sustaining, green canyons. New Mexico is powerfully feminine and erotic at core; if it horrifies Bishop Latour occasionally, it also nurtures and protects his sensuousness, including his love for Father Vaillant.

<sup>29</sup> See Judith Butler's Bodies That Matter for instance.

It happens like that in the world sometimes. Alexandra. . . . There are women who spread ruin around them through no fault of theirs, just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love. They can't help it. People come to them as people go to a warm fire in winter. (304)

In My Mortal Enemy, Myra's power is a "savagery" (68) that compels Oswald's and Nellie's attention, not necessarily to the benefit of either. Nellie thinks that "life had not suited [Oswald]: that he possessed some kind of courage and force which slept, which in another sort of world might have asserted themselves brilliantly. I thought he ought to have been a soldier or an explorer" (43). His force sleeps because he falls in love with Myra and bends himself to work that enables him to marry her.

Cather's lost lady, Mrs. Forrester, is an even more potent, corrupting feminine force--voracious and duplicitous feminine sexuality embodied. Niel initially thinks she is the keeper of sophistication and domestic comfort for pioneering men. But as the novel progresses, she emerges as, at core, an erotic essence, only superficially tamed by a husband, willing to partner with whomever either passion or necessity suggest, and destructive to those who love her.

Most significantly for my purposes, the force I have been describing as ubiquitous in Cather's work is racialized. Where antediluvian, wild, savage, corrupting or erotic force pulses in Cather's writing, racialized, primitivized figures are nearby, not the source of force themselves, but consistently marking its presence. In Alexander's Bridge, Bartley's passionate, youthful and self-annihilating force breaks out of its constraints because he reestablishes contact with Hilda, who is pointedly Irish. Her success in the theater is attributed to this Irishness: She is a Burgoyne, Irish people of the stage "for generations" with an "Irish voice" and a laugh never heard "out of Galway" (24). Part of her beauty is her "Irish skin" (42). Her Irishness is accented by the London setting of her affair with Bartley and by her difference in "background" from Bartley's elegant and refined Bostonian wife (3). Specifically as a racial other, Hilda is the condition that enables

Bartley's youthful, erotic, passionate self to re-emerge and take over, corrupting his masculine productivity.<sup>30</sup>

This kind of pairing between ethnic and racial others and the emergence of force--both productive and destructive--is a constant in Cather's novels. In The Professor's House, Cather marks Tom Outland's purity and his status as a primitive--an untutored, natural, inventive genius, also naturally appreciative of beauty and art--by giving him an affinity with an ancient native American civilization. He is spiritually in tune with the location and remains of the cliff city he finds, and his life is a mirror image of the story he pieces together of the city's former inhabitants.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Cather marks Thea Kronborg's powerful musical artistry by replacing her affinity with her family, who are not, she thinks, "of her kind" (301) for an affinity with Mexicans who, as Cather depicts them, are naturally superior musicians and dancers (206-8). Spanish Johnny claims that the quality of Thea's singing is something he never sees in "a child . . . outside Mexico" (206). Thea's success as a singer is foreshadowed by the dance in Mexican Town where Spanish Johnny and others first appreciate her voice, and where she is "one white head moving among so many dark ones" (209).<sup>32</sup> Spanish Johnny's musical sensibility is also the "only commensurate answer" to Thea's talent at the end of the novel (411).

Erotic force is racialized in O Pioneers!. The powerful lover of Alexandra's

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<sup>30</sup> Lindemann argues that Alexander's Bridge can be compared to cautionary tales meant to show non-reproductive sexuality as a form of race suicide. With Rhoda's suicide, Woolf may also have been literalizing, as a form of critique, moral purity campaigners' cautions against homosexuality as race suicide.

<sup>31</sup> The cliff city has never been invaded because of its remote site; similarly, Tom's purity of mind is a result of isolation: he has no formal schooling and spends a lot of his youth herding cattle with only a few other men. The inventiveness manifested by the architecture of the cliff city parallels Tom's scientific inventiveness: both the cliff dwellers and Tom die prematurely in wars started by someone else; and both the city and Tom's work are plundered after their deaths for others' material gain.

<sup>32</sup> Later in the novel, Thea's brothers also berate her for socializing with Mexicans (213-14).

fantasies is first "yellow" and "bronze" in contrast to Alexandra's "gleaming white body" (206). Toward the end of the novel, he is simultaneously darker and stronger: "His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze" (282-3). Destructive erotic force in this novel is also racialized, the product of Emil's trip to Mexico City, where he goes to escape his increasing erotic attraction for Marie, but which she imagines as essentially about eros: a "gay, corrupt old city" where Emil will live "among . . . temptations" (201), and serenade "all those Spanish girls dropping flowers from their windows" (193). As Marie's imagination foreshadows, Emil comes back from Mexico erotically changed. He kisses her for the first time immediately after his return, wearing the Mexican outfit he brought home with him. Emil's kiss also has a Mexican symbolic double--"a handful of uncut tourquoises, as big as marbles" that he takes from "the pocket of his velvet trousers" and drops "into [Marie's] lap" (224). This erotic gift from Mexico destroys both Emil and Marie: it leads to the assignation in the garden, over which Frank shoots them both. If Emil is the "shining youth" that Alexandra has pushed up out of the Nebraskan soil with her vitality, the erotic power of old Mexico is the destructive match to Alexandra's creative force.

Sensual and erotic force is also a racial characteristic in My Antonia. Blind Samson d'Arnault is an icon of racialized primitivism who exists in the novel for no reason other than to signal the awakening of Antonia's powerful sensuality.<sup>33</sup> D'Arnault's piano playing is instinctual rather than learned. It comes from "animal desires," (182) and is "barbarous" and "wonderful" (183). It is "abominable" piano playing, but "real" music, "vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses" (182). D'Arnault "enjoys himself as only a negro can" (183) and looks "like some glistening

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<sup>33</sup> Lisa Marcus also argues that with D'Arnault, "Cather, like other white American writers, embodied her Africanist characters with a vital sexuality and utilized them to dramatize carnal pleasure and transgression" (121).

African god of pleasure. full of strong. savage blood" (185).<sup>34</sup>

The scene in which d'Arnault plays and his listeners dance is a turning point in the novel after which Jim focuses on Antonia's sensuality. He describes her passion for dance and compares her to town girls, as he calls them, whose "bodies never moved inside their clothes: [and whose] muscles seemed to ask but one thing--not to be disturbed." Sensuality makes Antonia seem racially different: she and other ethnic girls who had "helped to break up the wild sod. . . . were almost a race apart" from the assimilated town girls (emphasis added). Out-of-door work had given them a vigor that "developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women" (192).

Antonia and Lena and the other country girls are not the same as d'Arnault. While Cather's depiction makes d'Arnault clearly a race apart--musical, pleasure loving, necessarily an untaught genius if a genius at all, because of his African heritage--they are almost a race apart. But at the same time that she makes this careful distinction, Cather also relies on the primitivist notion that Africans, and African Americans, are erotic powerhouses--gods of pleasure if gods of anything--to show that Antonia and her ethnic friends are erotically different from other Black Hawk residents. If they are not made racially the same as d'Arnault, they are not made entirely white either: they are racially like d'Arnault specifically by virtue of their sensuality.

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<sup>34</sup> This description of D'Arnault is reminiscent of the description of black musicians in Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness. Hall compares the innate racial savagery of the musicians to the innate homosexual otherness of her white characters. She relies on the concepts of innate racial and sexual differences to call for an end to social disapprobation of homosexuals. Hall writes that Henry

was not an exemplary young Negro: indeed he could be the reverse very often. A crude animal Henry could be at times . . . just a primitive force rendered dangerous by drink, rendered offensive by civilization. Yet as he sang his sins seemed to drop from him, leaving him pure, unshamed, triumphant.

He and his brother are "carried away . . . by their music" and seem to sing "a kind of challenge: imperious, loud, almost terrifying. . . . a challenge to the world on behalf of themselves and of all the afflicted" including homosexuals (363).

Just as d'Arnault signals the not-quite-white erotics of Antonia and the other ethnic immigrant girls, a statue of "a scantily draped figure, an Arab or Egyptian slave girl" in The Lost Lady signals Mrs. Forrester's corrupt erotics, as well as the end of Niel's innocence. The girl in the statue holds "a large flat shell from the California coast" where "letters for the post were always left" (97), including, toward the end of the novel, Mrs. Forrester's letter to her lover. Mr. Forrester draws Niel's embarrassed attention to the letter, discussing the envelope and Mrs. Forrester's fine penmanship before he lets Niel take it to mail. If Niel has believed he might be wrong about Mrs. Forrester, or that he is chivalrously keeping her secret from Mr. Forrester, the statue seems to hand him horrifying sexual truth. Cather writes, "Niel had often wondered just how much the Captain knew. Now, as he went down the hill, he felt sure that he knew everything: more than anyone else: all there was to know about Marian Forrester" (99).

Cather's status as a modernist has been the subject of debate in criticism of her work since the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> If the debate is resolved now, that is mostly because the question has been discredited by critics who fracture a monolithic canonical Modernism into multiple modernisms by taking the histories and arts of women and people of color as starting points for literary investigation. But even given the old definition of Modernism, and despite her oft-discussed nostalgia, her political conservatism, and her own repudiation of the modern in art and literature, Cather's use of racialized images to signal overwhelming force, purity, corruption, and sensuality is of a kind with other modernist primitivisms. As do D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, Sigmund Freud, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce (albeit all differently), Cather uses icons of primal humanity to represent evil, eros, power, corruption, and revitalizing energy. Cather and many other modernists imagine an ordinary human core, attached to the earth, that can be stifled or set free, twisted into ugliness or pressed into the

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<sup>35</sup> See the discussion of the critical response to Cather, above.

service of civilization and materialism. This originary humanity is repeatedly represented or marked by the presence of dark skinned figures.

### **Sapphira and the Slave Girl**

Here I want to reassess Cather's last novel in terms of this trope I see all over Cather's work: her use of racialized figures to mark supremely creative and supremely dangerous force, often erotic, gendered either productively masculine or corrosively feminine, and implicated in the nation-building ethos and the homoerotic suggestiveness of Cather's fiction. Cather's last novel is her most in-depth examination of corrosive feminine force. It is also, her most direct representation of lesbian erotics.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, if racialized figures are present in all Cather's novels, they are more prominently figured in Sapphira than they are in any other. I argue that Cather's use of dark-skinned figures--four generations of African American women--has everything to do with her depiction of Sapphira as a powerful lesbian-erotic as well as corrupting feminine force. If, as the examples in the preceding section show, Cather participated in the kind of Orientalist modernist fantasy often discussed by cultural critics, in Sapphira this primitivism takes a distinctly lesbian form.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is often discussed in terms of its autobiographical and historical content.<sup>37</sup> The novel tells a fictionalized version of events that took place in ante-

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<sup>36</sup> As many critics, including Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Sharon O'Brien have pointed out, Cather often identifies desire for women through heterosexual relations or male narrators. In Sapphira, though, Cather "creates a female character who desires a woman" and "makes her authorial identification with this character explicit by entering her own text as a character in the final pages of the novel" (Lisa Marcus 101).

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Susan Rosowski, Sharon O'Brien, Hermione Lee, James Woodress, and Merrill Maguire Skaggs. But it is also worth noting that until Toni Morrison wrote about Sapphira in 1990, it was one of Cather's least-discussed novels. See Deborah Carlin's Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading, 8-26, for a discussion of why Cather's later works in general have been much less frequently discussed than her earlier works. Joyce Macdonald discusses the ways in which Cather used the autobiographical content to make claims about the role of art and the artist in society.

and postbellum Back Creek, Virginia—in 1856 and 1881—on the mill and farm where Cather spent the first nine years of her life. The story involves Sapphira Colbert's plot to have her nephew Martin rape Nancy, the slave girl of the title, in order to maintain control over Nancy's sexuality. With the help of Rachel, Sapphira's daughter, Nancy escapes rape and slavery by running to Canada via the underground railroad.

Cather's rendition of the story is based on stories Cather heard women in her family tell. That its source and setting are biographically important suggests to many that the novel is Cather's nostalgic return to familial—particularly matrilineal—origins. Sharon O'Brien, for instance, reads the novel as Cather's treatment of her relationship with her mother and other female forebears, depicting her mother's complex mix of harshness and generosity. At the same time, according to O'Brien, Cather explores and values, in a way she had not before done so fully, her own matrilineal artistic inheritance (*Willa Cather* 45-48).

The novel is overwhelmingly nostalgic. Cather's formal experimentation involves mixing chapters that progress the plot with chapters describing ancestors and land grants that lead to Cather-family ownership of land on Back Creek. Cather also includes parenthetical narrative explanations of Virginia traditions as if to rue their loss. There is, as well, plenty of nostalgic content, including flower-filled descriptions of pastoral scenes and scents, and devotion on the part of loyal slaves. Both this nostalgia and the monstrosity of the novel are consistent with a southern tradition of pastoral writing about United States slavocracy.<sup>38</sup>

This nostalgia is a problem for critics who focus on the historical context of the novel. To some degree, Cather seems to expose slavery's brutality, its distortion of human relationships, and its specifically sexual violence. Toni Morrison's point that Cather is the

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<sup>38</sup> Joyce Macdonald writes that "Willa Cather's version of the pastoral are a product of her Southern sensibility and share common factors with the Southern literary tradition" (x). But Macdonald also discusses the ways in which Cather resists this tradition.

first white writer to even try to explore relations between white and black women in slavery has been taken up by many critics.<sup>39</sup> Cather's plot does expose Sapphira's absolute power over Nancy, and Nancy's corresponding vulnerability. But most agree that Cather's nostalgia, as well as her limited ability to develop the inner lives of the black characters she introduces may have seriously flawed her novel.

Such analyses based on the novel's southern antebellum context are extremely valuable. To add to rather than replace these readings, I want to read the novel through an alternate literary and historical context: the sexological writings that are largely responsible for the emergence of the modern category "lesbian," a category that became part of public discourse in the United States during Cather's youth and young adulthood.<sup>40</sup> If the novel is part of the southern tradition of pastoral writing about slavery, and, paradoxically, part of a tradition of post-emancipation exposure of the sexual nature of violence perpetrated upon slaves, it is also, as reading the novel through the sexological discourse shows, part of a tradition I am calling Sapphic primitivism.

Cather was familiar with the racialized discourse about homosexuality discussed in chapter two above. In a 1896 article printed in the Nebraska State Journal,<sup>41</sup> Cather praised

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<sup>39</sup> Many critics have also attempted to show that Cather's novel makes a critique of slavery that is in conflict with her nostalgia for antebellum Virginia. Loretta Wasserman argues that Cather's novel is a critique of stereotypes of Blacks in Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind. Merrill Maquire Skaggs argues that Sapphira is exceptional among southern women's writing of the late '30s for its dramatization of "the evils of slavery" (171). Joyce Macdonald argues that Sapphira is "a finely tuned study of the negative effects of the institution of slavery on the minds both of slaveholders and of those living within the system, as well as the corrosive impact on the moral, spiritual, and artistic sensibility" (89). Naomi Morgenstern takes a slightly different view: she discusses the ways in which the nostalgic affect of the plot and the brutality of the antebellum setting work together in the novel to position idealized mother/daughter bonding as an alternative to initiation into brutal heterosexuality.

<sup>40</sup> That the sexologists entirely created the modern category lesbian is disputed. See the discussion of Valerie Traub's work above and George Chauncey's "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality," for instance.

<sup>41</sup> She wrote a regular Sunday column for the Journal for nearly seven years beginning in the winter of 1893-1894 (Slote 12-13).

Sir Richard Burton's "matchless translation of those glorious Arabian romances. The Thousand Nights and a Night" (KA 186). This suggests that she would also have read Burton's concluding essay in which he describes the "Sotadic Zone" as an area characterized by homosexuality.<sup>42</sup> That Cather doesn't mention the essay specifically indicates less that she didn't read it than that she didn't think it especially noteworthy that Burton characterizes various parts of the world as sites where homosexuality is "an established racial institution" (Cory 208).

Whether or not she also read Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis or Sigmund Freud directly, Cather's fiction "is clearly and deeply marked by the medical and juridical discourses that pathologized nonprocreative sexualities" (Lindemann 6).<sup>43</sup> As a drama critic in Lincoln, Cather associated with relatively avant-garde groups of people who "would have been among the first to be aware of the emerging conceptualization of homosexuality" (O'Brien, Willa Cather 135). And Cather's letters to Louise Pound reflect characterizations of intimacy between women as unnatural and perverse, a characterization that is a product of sexological and medical literatures that relied on comparative ethnography to make their arguments about homosexuality among whites in England and the United States.

Cather's letters to Pound also reveal her incorporation of an Orientalist fantasy about unconventional sexuality in general. In the same letter that acknowledges the "unnatural" quality of her relationship with Pound, Cather discusses FitzGerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, which she had given to Pound as a gift. Marilee Lindemann argues

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<sup>42</sup> The Sotadic zone Burton describes in the essay he writes to conclude his book includes, as I discussed in chapter two above, "Meridional France, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and Greece, with the coast regions of Africa from Morocco to Egypt" also "Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Chaldea, Afghanistan, Sind the Punjab and Kashmir" as well as "China, Japan . . . Turkistan" and "the South Sea Islands and the New World where, at the time of its discovery, Sotadic love was . . . an established racial institution" (Cory 208).

<sup>43</sup> As Joanna Russ notes, Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis was first published in 1882, and Ellis's Studies in the Psychology of Sex in 1897, when Cather was nine and twenty-four respectively (79).

that Cather gave the book as "a kind of fetish, a substitute for [her] soon to be absent body." (21) and as an invitation to revel in the fantasy of the Orient as a space of sexual promise (22). The letter, with its convergence of sexological ideas about homosexuality and its reliance on Orientalist fantasy to evoke risqué sensuality "stands . . . as an early important example of the mingling of racial and sexual inflections in Cather's figuring of queerness and the queer" (22).<sup>44</sup>

Cather's journalism also reflects her participation in Orientalist fantasy. In a 1895 newspaper column, Cather praises a "new Hindoo play called Aspara" because its author, Judith Gautier, "has followed her father's eastern studies and gone beyond him" (KA 138). This "eastern" quality of Gautier's work, she says, is a result of hot winds blowing up from the south. Because of these winds, all French writers--Theophile Gautier, Daudet, and Flaubert--are "full of oriental feeling [sic]," and France is a place where "[t]he great passions never become wholly conventionalized" (KA 138). The passions described here as "never wholly conventionalized" certainly include the lesbian passions of Gautier's famous Mademoiselle de Maupin and Daudet's Sapho. O'Brien writes that these two novels "gripped Cather's imagination in the 1890s" (Willa Cather 136).

Finally, an anecdote about Cather suggests that she believed she could step out of conventions about gender-appropriate behavior for young white girls by stepping into blackness. In her memoir Willa Cather Living, Edith Lewis recounts that Cather

once told of an old judge who came to call at Willow Shade, and who began stroking her curls and talking to her in the playful platitudes one addressed to little girls--and of how she horrified her mother by breaking out

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<sup>44</sup> Marilee Lindemann interprets Cather's choice of gift through Edward Said's concept of Orientalism:

As a gift, the Rubaiyat is a safe choice in that gift editions of FitzGerald's translation were enormously popular at the turn of the century, but it is also a risky, risqué invitation to revel in the Orientalist fantasy of the Orient as a space of "sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies. (Said qtd. in Lindemann 22)

suddenly: "I'se a dang'ous nigger. I is!" (13)<sup>45</sup>

As a second-hand account, Lewis's description of an interaction between the judge, Cather, and her mother is to be viewed skeptically. It may show the young Cather trying to cross through a figuration of blackness into maleness and forbidden sexuality to the degree that "dang'ous nigger" connotes hypersexual masculinity.

Lewis's account is more important as a first-hand description of the adult Cather telling a story, however. Even if Cather never spoke to the judge at all, in the story she told Lewis about herself, Cather deploys a figuration of blackness in order to mark--and celebrate--her own rebellion against "the smooth unreal conventions about little [white] girls"--conventions that include narrowly defined heterosexuality (13). Also, when Cather explains her outburst, as Lewis says she does, as "the only way that occurred to her at the moment" to resist those conventions (13), Cather also suggests that she has, since she was a child, discovered other methods of resisting.

I suggest that Cather reveals one of these other ways to resist gender/sex conventions, still involving figurations of blackness, in Sapphira and the Slave Girl. Reading the novel through this personal anecdote, through the history of the discursive construction of homosexuality, and through Cather's participation in primitivist and Orientalist literary modes, underlines the homoerotics that seep into the novel via Cather's deployment of the minor character, Jezebel. Cather makes Jezebel a mythic savage African--a cannibal whose dying wish is to eat the hand of a girl; perhaps also a female version of the "dang'ous nigger" of Cather's anecdote--and Sapphira's closest ally in the novel. This alliance is figured in many small ways that give Sapphira's monstrosity--her swollen, dropsical body and her abominable abuses of Nancy and Til--a savage mirror

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<sup>45</sup> Sharon O'Brien interprets Cather's outburst as her "first rebellion against patriarchy," represented by the judge, and also a rejection of "her mother's standards of propriety and hospitality" in favor of assuming "the identity most opposed to the one her mother had fashioned for her" (Emerging 43). Similarly, Lisa Marcus describes the outburst as a "ventriloquized performance of blackness [that] reveals an urgent desire to disrupt the venter of Southern social customs and marks her entrance into racial othering" (97).

image. As an adult storyteller, Cather marked her rebelliousness against sex/gender conventions for white girls by using a figuration of blackness--by telling a story about a girlhood claim to be black and dangerous; similarly, as a novelist, she marks Sapphira's sexual perversity and her resistance to patriarchy by allying her with Jezebel. Jezebel and Sapphira express perverse appetites for girls that Cather seems to both celebrate and abhor.

### **Jezebel's Mythic Savagery**

Cather makes Jezebel an icon of mythological savagery in the section of the novel that gives her "history." She is the "only one of the Colbert negroes who had come from Africa" (90); specifically, she comes from a "fierce cannibal people" (91). She is also "anatomically . . . remarkable" according to the captain of the slave ship on which she is brought to the United States. He does not say outright that she is long in the clitoris, as do captains who write the early-modern travel narratives Valerie Traub discusses.<sup>46</sup> But he does say that Jezebel is anatomically as good as "the best of the men." (93): "tall, straight, muscular" and "long in the legs" (94).

Jezebel's savagery involves dangerous sexual behavior as well. Cather hints at this sexuality but leaves it mysterious and, significantly, unnamed. The sexuality of Jezebel's behavior on the slave ship is "felt without being specifically named there," an "overtone" suggested by both hints and ambiguities.<sup>47</sup> Jezebel causes some kind of "row" in the "women's quarters" after the sailors have "seen that all the females were lying in the spaces assigned to them" (92). The row is not, as might be expected, a resistance to slavers: they have gone on deck to "take air." It does, however, disrupt women in all female "quarters."

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<sup>46</sup> See chapter 2 above.

<sup>47</sup> For Cather to suggest that there was anything sexy for captives of a slave ship is offensive. Cather makes this suggestion in part because her concern in this novel is not slavery or the enslaved. She is using the antebellum context for purposes of making homoerotics "felt upon the pages" but not "specifically named there," as she writes in "The Novel D meubl ."

Also, in the aftermath of the row Jezebel bites the "thumb" of the first mate. That a "thumb," here, isn't just a thumb is suggested by the fact that the sailors give Jezebel "the name she had borne ever since" as a result of the row (92). This naming shows that the sailors perceived what they saw to be sexual: "Jezebel" is the name associated with the slave-rooted caricature of dangerous black-female sexuality (Morton, xiii, xiv, xvi, 10) as well as the name of the murderous Biblical wife of Ahab.

Jezebel's cannibalism recedes as she becomes American but reappears at the end of her life.<sup>48</sup> The only thing that would tempt her to eat, she tells Sapphira, is "a little pickaninny's hand" (89). Specifically, she seems to want the flesh of her great-granddaughter. Nancy is too old to be described as a "pickaninny," but her hands are characterized by their youthfulness and their appetizing bonelessness (!) earlier in the novel. They are "slender, nimble hands, so flexible that one would say there were no hard bones in them at all . . . like a child's" (18). Nancy insinuates herself into Jezebel's fantasy when she jumps up in terror immediately after Jezebel speaks, crying out "Oh, she's a-wanderin' agin! She wanders turrible now. Don't stay, Missy! She's out of her haid" (89). This is Cather's clearest depiction of Jezebel as an ultimately unregenerate savage.

Sapphira's remarks, in this scene, also suggest that Sapphira is Jezebel's savage double. "No need," Sapphira rebukes Nancy, "for you to be speaking up. I know your granny through and through. She is no more out of her head than I am" (89). As Naomi Morgenstern points out, "Sapphira's utterance aligns her with Jezebel. . . . Jezebel would eat her young, and Sapphira who understands her perfectly appears to be seated at the same table" (201). Sapphira claims both familiarity and accord with Jezebel's most savage desires. If Jezebel is a mythic savage African, anatomically remarkable for being long in

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<sup>48</sup> Jezebel exhibits other mysteriously unnamed behaviors as well. Her first master "lodge[s] her in the haymow over the cow barn" because her "personal manners" are "too strong for even a Dutch Farmer's household" (96). He also teaches her to do all the dairy work but, for unspecified reasons, "never allowed her to touch the butter" (96).

the "leg," cannibalistic, and interested in consuming Nancy in particular. Cather makes it clear that Sapphira is no less savage, and no less interested in consuming Nancy.<sup>49</sup>

Sapphira is distinctly cannibalistic, elsewhere, too. Cather repeatedly mentions Sapphira's "very plump white hands" (6, 7, 53, 100) and her swelling, dropsical, pale body (32). This white plumpness is contrasted with Till's "spare" frame (31) and "small feet," (32) and Nancy's oft-mentioned thinness (13, 18, 45). Sapphira also swells out of her clothes and shoes (32) while Jezebel "wither[s]" into them (86). In death, Jezebel is so diminished that "one of the embroidered nightgowns [Sapphira] wore as a girl" is "big enough" to shroud the once "tall, strapping woman" (98). These contrasts suggest that Sapphira has grown plump on the bodies of Nancy, Till, and Jezebel, among the others who are her slaves.

Sapphira is Jezebel's double in many other subtle ways. Jezebel arrived at the Dodderidge home the "the day Sapphira was born" (96). Hence, Jezebel professes to have special knowledge of Sapphira even though Sapphira and her motives are a mystery to everyone else (22). "Of course I know you," Jezebel says, as Sapphira enters her cabin. "A'int I knowed you since de day you was bawn" (86). Sapphira's visit to Jezebel suggests that despite the master/slave relationship between them, Jezebel is Sapphira's peer in a way that none of the other characters are. Everyone else who has contact with Sapphira comes to her house or her carriage, but Sapphira goes to see Jezebel in her cabin.<sup>50</sup> Cather draws attention to Sapphira's visit, too, by making it a production--the

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<sup>49</sup> Other critics have also noted that Cather makes Jezebel and Sapphira parallel. Hermione Lee argues that "the macabre detail [Jezebel wanting to eat a hand] reflects on Sapphira's likeness to Jezebel (she is a kind of cannibal herself) but also on the cannibalizing of a whole people" (366). Deborah Carlin suggests that the two have a kind of equality of shared humanity (157). Naomi Morgenstern describes Jezebel as Sapphira's double. And Merrill Maquire Skaggs writes that Sapphira "understands" Jezebel's cannibalism (173).

<sup>50</sup> Martin comes to the farm at Sapphira's invitation. Henry regularly goes to Sapphira's table for breakfast, and is occasionally summoned for tea. Rachel intrudes on her mother before Nancy has finished putting up Sapphira's hair. Even when Sapphira goes out in her carriage, her grandchildren, the postmistress, and merchants come to her window to talk or do business.

"boys" have to come, dressed nicely, with poles to carry Sapphira in her chair across the yard.

Also, as Jezebel is anatomically as good as "the best of the men" (93) in the past of the novel, so Sapphira is "the Master" in her marriage. The novel opens with the breakfast-table battle in which Henry asserts his husbandly authority and refuses to sign for the sale of Nancy (4). But Henry's masculinity is qualified from the beginning. He is "a solid, powerful figure of a man in whom height and weight agreed," but has "eyes that were puzzling. . . . reflective, almost dreamy" with "long lashes [that] would have been a charm in a woman" (4-5). And he later says to Sapphira, approvingly, "You're the master here, and I'm the miller" (50).

Other links between Jezebel and Sapphira include that they are both approaching the ends of their lives. "I've been housebound for a long while now, like you" Sapphira tells Jezebel. "We must take what comes to us and be resigned" (87). Names mark both as sexual transgressors:<sup>51</sup> if Jezebel's name refers to a caricature of dangerous sexuality, "Sapphira" is reminiscent of Sappho, whose poetry Cather read and liked, and who is also a dangerously sexual character in some of the French literature Cather enjoyed.

Most significantly, Jezebel's monstrous desire to eat Nancy's hand is parallel to Sapphira's monstrous scheme to rape Nancy by making use of Martin as her surrogate.<sup>52</sup> Sapphira is obsessed, in general, with being at the center of the sexual lives of all of Jezebel's female descendants. She marries Till off to old Jeff, "a Capon man," as if to secure even more exclusive control over Till's sexuality than she already has as owner (43). When Till becomes pregnant anyway, Sapphira speaks as if she were the injured but

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<sup>51</sup> Merrill Maquire Skaggs writes that "one practice widely recognized already is Cather's reliance on symbolic or meaning-full names to define her characters. . . . Cather's fondness for this device is so marked that one generally does well to assume a name has meaning until all attempts to find one have failed" (14).

<sup>52</sup> Naomi Morgenstern also argues that "Sapphira wants to rape Nancy if only by making use of [Martin as] a surrogate male body" (191).

forgiving party, telling Henry "Till was within her rights, seeing she had to live with old Jeff. I never hectored her about it" (9). Sapphira also gets pleasure from thinking of Till's sexuality. In an exchange with Henry over whether Nancy's father is "that painter from Baltimore" or one of Henry's notoriously rakish brothers "hanging around" Back Creek at the same time the painter is there, Sapphira "laugh[s] discreetly as if the idea amused and rather pleased her" (9).

Cather even leaves open the possibility that Sapphira orchestrated Till's rape just as she tries to orchestrate Nancy's. It is unclear what "idea" about Till's pregnancy amuses and pleases Sapphira. Syntax and juxtaposition suggest that she is pleased to have gotten "the portraits out of" the painter "and a smart yellow girl into the bargain," as she says. But if we imagine that she behaved in the past of the novel as she does in the present, she may have invited the rakish brothers to disrupt a romance she believed to be going on between the painter and Till, as she later invites Martin, another rakish Colbert, to break up a romance she imagines is taking place between Henry and Nancy. Till's own ambiguous remarks don't rule out this possibility. She recalls only that the "Cuban painter came along to do the portraits" and "was a long while doing them" (73). This mournful remark neither confirms the identity of Nancy's father, nor rules out the possibility that Till was raped by the painter, or a Colbert, or both. Furthermore, the discrepancy about whether the painter is "from Baltimore" or "Cuban" draws attention to the possibilities suggested by Till's ambiguity.

Cather also leaves evidence that the effort to orchestrate Nancy's rape is an erotic escapade for Sapphira. Critics have often assumed that jealousy over Henry's wandering affection motivates Sapphira's plot to have Nancy raped.<sup>53</sup> But this assumption leaves Cather's plot seeming illogical: rape would certainly punish Nancy, but in the context of American chattel slavery, as Toni Morrison points out, Nancy's rape would not make her

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<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, David Stouck's Willa Cather's Imagination.

less available to Henry. As a slave, she can't be "ruined" as far as Henry is concerned: "ruined" implies a loss of marriageability, and there is never any marriage to Henry in Nancy's future (Morrison 25).

Sapphira might see Nancy as a rival, but Cather never encourages this interpretation: on the other hand much detail suggests that Sapphira sees Henry as the rival.<sup>54</sup> Both Nancy and Till are welcome in Sapphira's bedroom to brush her hair and dress her, while Sapphira's daughter Rachel is an unwelcome intruder and Henry never appears in Sapphira's bedroom at all. Sapphira invites him to stay once, but only as a ploy to assess his level of involvement with Nancy. The only moment of satisfaction Sapphira experiences in the entire novel is when Nancy and Till, believing Sapphira ill, rush into her room "sooner than she thought possible." Cather specifies that Sapphira is "comforted by the promptness and sympathy of [Till and Nancy]" (107). Till sits on the floor "rhythmically stroking her mistress's swollen ankles and knees, murmuring: 'it's all right, Missy'" (107). Henry isn't mentioned as a source of comfort at all.

The scene in which Martin traps Nancy in the cherry tree and grabs her legs is clear in its suggestion that Sapphira's motive in plotting the rape includes Sapphira's erotic desire for Nancy's body. Martin draws Nancy's "two legs about his cheeks like a frame" and smells something "sweet--like May apples" (181). The orality of the scene, and the vaginal rather than phallic suggestiveness, emphasize the fact that Sapphira has orchestrated the rape: Martin is present more as a surrogate than as body in his own right. In addition, the seductive language suggests that Sapphira's interest in Nancy is erotic if also angry. The orality of the scene also furthers the connection between Sapphira's desire for control over Nancy's sexuality and Jezebel's cannibalism. As Jezebel wants access to Nancy's body in a prohibited way, so does Sapphira.

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<sup>54</sup> Lisa Marcus argues that "Sapphira harbors the desire for Nancy that she projects upon her husband, making her reaction to Nancy's sexual body a complex mixture of jealousy and desire" (118).

Complicating Sapphira's erotic interest in Nancy's sexuality. Sapphira seems also to want to play patriarch. If she wants to consume Nancy, she also wants to locate herself in relation to Nancy as if Nancy were a white woman over whom Sapphira had the authority of brother or father. This is evident in the language with which Cather describes Sapphira's anxiety over the possibility that Henry and Nancy are sexually involved: she is afraid of being "befooled," "hoodwinked," "deceived," and "mocked" by members of her household (105-6). Sapphira's fear is thus explicitly connected to the specifically sexual way in which several white women are "fooled" in the novel: Mandy Ringer's daughters are "fooled" when they become pregnant by men who can't be forced to marry them: Martin has an ugly false tooth because he "fools" a girl whose brothers beat him unconscious in retaliation. To be "fooled" is something that happens to white women but cannot happen to black women in the context of slavery, as it relies on the idea that a woman is tricked out of rights--to marry the fathers of their children and gain in status by virtue of their relation to a man--that enslaved black women do not have.

White fathers and brothers are also "fooled"--proven inadequate--when their female charges become pregnant. Martin understands his beating to be a fair exchange: he takes something from the brothers when he "fools" their sister. They seek to take back their stolen authority by giving him a beating: they "put their mark on him by knocking out one of his white teeth" (163). But they also recognize him as one of themselves when they agree to fight "fair"--with fists rather than a whip--and "let his horse go home to give the alarm" (163).

Lawndis, however, can't participate in this exchange of women and power. Because he is lame, other men make free with his sisters. "Fooling" seldom happens twice in one family, the narrator reports. "even in the most shiftless households" (120). But Mandy Ringer's daughters have no one "to see [they] git [their] rights" (122). Lame Lawndis can't force a marriage when one sister, and then another, become pregnant. Sapphira will prove as inadequate a patriarch as Lawndis if Nancy, like Till, becomes

pregnant in ways Sapphira does not authorize.

Sapphira's anxiety over Nancy's sexual status is illogical given the historical context, as Morrison points out: she treats Nancy as if she were a white daughter or sister who can be fooled, and understands that potential fooling as a slight upon herself. This is one of the reasons Sapphira makes so many people angry. Cather seems, as Toni Morrison says, to be writing about the relationship between white and black women in slavery. But in a substantial way she isn't writing about black women or slavery at all. Rather, she is using slavery as a context through which to write about white male authority over white women, and to explore the possibilities of sadistic, controlling, lesbian-erotic freedom for white women at the expense of black women's freedom. More specifically, she is exploring the possibility of sexual freedom for those women who have to struggle for equality with white husbands, fathers and brothers who are not also owners, but who also stand to gain more control over black women the more they succeed in gaining equality with white men. As she professes to do in the anecdote she tells Edith Lewis, Cather explores possibilities for white women's erotic lives by making a white woman character cross into patriarchal masculinity, and by giving her a double who is not the "dang'ous nigger" of Cather's anecdote, but is, rather, a "dangerous" black woman.

Sapphira's monstrous cannibalism might be construed as Cather's critique of slavery. Her cannibalism might be read as a metaphor for white exploitation of black labor and bodies. Cather may be suggesting that slave-owning in America is akin to eating one's young. This is an apt metaphor for the legacy of slavery in the United States, where white women's wealth has been gained at the expense of the bodies of enslaved Africans. Cather might be imagining the covert war against whites the grandfather in Ralph Ellison's novel The Invisible Man (1947) would later urge his descendants to wage: "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). Sapphira is a white monstrosity, literally swollen to bursting--a calamity which, Cather's novel suggests, is an American legacy of having

metaphorically cannibalized generations of slaves.

The question of whether Cather is writing critically about slavery, however, as most critics note, is complicated by her nostalgia. Similarly, it has to be complicated by the likelihood that Cather was using an available American story of racial mixing to discuss possibilities for white women's sexual freedom in the context of white heterosexual patriarchy. In one very important way, Cather is not writing about slavery at all. Rather, she is using the rhetorical trope employed by sexologists--referencing Sapphira's monstrous, sadistic, lesbianism--by comparing her to a mythic savage, an African cannibal with a remarkable anatomy, castrating jaws, and a peculiar taste for girls.

## Conclusion

All three of the writers I discuss here reject conventions of white femininity by writing white women characters into contact with figurations of blackness. They do this in part as a product of the comparative ethnographic mode of sexological writing of the turn of the century. Virginia Woolf presents what is perhaps the most agonized view of Sapphism as an unfulfilled imperialist fantasy--a suicide in lieu of a voyage to "islands where the parrots chatter and the creepers . . ." (*The Waves* 19). For Sylvia Townsend Warner, Sapphism is a fantasy of escape from class and country, but also no escape. The heroine must take up the racial burden of her own imperialist past, since both the political process of doing so and the antiracist effect are necessary for sensual fulfillment. Cather presents Jezebel and Sapphira as a pair to emphasize a shared savagery--to show both as, at core, cannibals, whose desire is for a girl's body--and to introduce homoerotics into her novel. Perhaps, in writing *Sapphira*, Cather shrugs off the once-empowering identity of the male "dang'ous nigger" of her childhood fantasy and takes upon her writing self an identity of old, savage Jezebel, an even more "dang'ous" black woman figure who suggests to her--and whose oppression suggests to her--the possibility of white lesbian erotic freedom.

It would be easy to stop with an admonishment to writers and artists who seek to represent lesbianism textually not to fall into Sapphic primitivism such as it is employed by Woolf, Warner, and Cather.<sup>55</sup> Sapphic primitivism is a strong legacy, after all, considering how often lesbian readers and writers, especially since the 1970s, have taken Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, among others whose works I might have discussed in this context, as foremothers. Despite this legacy, however, we need modes of lesbian representation that do not fetishize individuals of color, members of the working class, or people from specific geographies.

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<sup>55</sup> In "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," Biddy Martin discusses contemporary examples of what might be called Sapphic primitivism. See also Jewelle Gomez's essay, discussed above, and Jane Alycee's "What's Race got to do with it?"

Such fetishizing, as Heather Findlay puts it, "allows us to circumvent the Real of racial disintegration" (472).

Pointing out racisms of the past, or of Elsewhere, however, is one of those comforting things "well-meaning white people" often do without necessarily having any transformative effect on racist logic.<sup>56</sup> My larger concern is to understand the multiple significances of the fact that "lesbian" and "homosexual" are constructs that developed in tandem with racialized constructions of identification. For political organizing, teaching, and writing, we need to understand "black" and "lesbian," among other constructions, as intersecting and interdependent. And we need to use knowledge of this interdependence to develop a politics built on a sense of mutuality rather than on inclusion, which seems to lapse into assimilationist strategies that maintain supremacies based on race, sex, sexuality, and class.

As theorists of race show,<sup>57</sup> the only coherence "whiteness" has comes from inscribing "blackness" elsewhere, just as normative heterosexuality gains coherence from being defined against homosexuality and other "perversions." Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Willa Cather began to understand this characteristic of racial definition because of their interest in representing lesbianism textually, and because the sexological models they had for this kind of representation relied on a comparative ethnographic mode. To some degree, textually representing lesbianism meant to Woolf, Warner and Cather disrupting the stability of the line between whiteness and blackness. This, in turn, potentially challenges the basis on which privileges accrue to "white" individuals--individuals who, in a given historical moment, are able to inscribe themselves into whiteness by excising blackness from their self or group definition. If Woolf, Warner, and Cather stopped at what I am calling Sapphic primitivism, they still leave a

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<sup>56</sup> Naomi Wolf uses this phrase in her essay "The Racism of Well-Meaning White People."

<sup>57</sup> For instance, see Race edited by Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek.

legacy contemporary writers and cultural critics can use to investigate the mutuality of constructions of race and sexuality, and to further disrupt the coherence of whiteness as well as heterosexuality.

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