

PUBLIC ACTS AND PRIVATE LANGUAGES:

Bisexuality and the Multiple Discourses of Constance Grey Swartz

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IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, among the middle and upper classes “romantic friendships” between women were somewhat tolerated. Women were permitted intense relationships with one another provided that an erotic physical relationship was not revealed. By the early twentieth century, however, this tolerance had been eroded by the work of sexologists and psychologists who placed intimacy between women among the behaviours defined as abnormal, making the admission to such relationships, even within private journals and correspondence, fraught with danger. Moreover, as sex was still viewed as something that ought only to take place within the confines of heterosexual matrimony, during this period it remained relatively uncommon to openly discuss any aspect of sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise.

These considerations make assessment of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century journals and correspondence particularly difficult. Private papers that attest to intimate bonds between women are rarely explicit in their testimony of physical relationships, and the women concerned have often lived at least part of their lives in heterosexual marriages. Interpretation has consequently taken two courses: in some histories of lesbianism, the expression of passionate emotional relationships between women has been taken to signify a repressed lesbian identity, and any heterosexual relationships are portrayed as merely a reflection of the desire for respectability or an interim stage on the path to a fully lesbian life. Conversely, some biographical studies have suppressed references that suggest more than friendship between the women involved, choosing instead to portray these relationships as an emotional but non-sexual part of a “New Woman” lifestyle adopted by their heterosexual middle-class subjects. There

exists the potential to read either too much or too little into personal documents, at the risk of obscuring the lives of both lesbian and bisexual women. Bisexuality in particular has been lost in this dichotomized approach to sexuality, with women whose romantic lives involved both women and men being claimed by both camps as their own.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual history remains plagued by questions of identity and genital sexuality. While the ascription of heterosexuality to historical sources remains common practice, historians are reluctant to describe or analyze as lesbian, gay, or bisexual those sources that lack a consciously realized non-heterosexual identity. Furthermore, whereas proof of genital contact is not required in the history of heterosexuality, some historians are reluctant to include in queer histories those who cannot be proved to have had genital contact with each other. This is particularly the case in lesbian history. However, as Sheila Jeffreys points out, "if we accept that proof of genital contact is required before we may include any relationship between two women in the history of lesbianism, then there is a serious possibility that we will end up with no lesbian history at all."¹

This is not to suggest that sex between women is unimportant in lesbian history: Jeffreys and others have rightly criticized Lillian Faderman's valorizing of women's friendships and Adrienne Rich's theory of the lesbian continuum for their disguising of the radical difference between same-sex friendships and sexuality.² It is crucial both for lesbian history and for the recognition of lesbian political community that historians of lesbianism acknowledge the greater threat to heterosexist patriarchy that lesbian sexuality represents, along with the consequent difference between the historical experiences of women who had sexual relationships with one another and of women whose primary affectional and political commitments may have been to other women but whose sexual commitments were not.

The acceptance only of visible markings, such as butch dress and mannerisms, and self-identification as "proof" of lesbian status does limit the extent of our lesbian history. As Martha Vicinus has argued, "We seem to accept only what is seen and what is said as evidence.

¹ Sheila Jeffreys, "Does It Matter if They Did It?," in *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840-1985*, ed. The Lesbian History Group (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 19-28.

² For example, see Jeffreys, "Does It Matter If They Did It?," 19-28; and Donna Penn, "Queer: Theorizing Politics and History," *Radical History Review* 62 (Spring 1995): 24-42.

These limitations have shaped both how we know and how we imagine the lesbian."³ Lesbian history has become dominated by an identity model that emphasizes explicitness in verbal or visual signs as the necessary precursor to acceptance of lesbian sources. Vicinus wants instead to argue for the "not said" and the "not seen" as conceptual tools, although she does not tell us how these tools might be applied in historical research. Further, rejecting the assumption that married middle-class women in the nineteenth century necessarily had "a heterosexual identity based on a positive choice of sexual activity with men, or indeed upon any concept of desire for men," Jeffreys wonders if we can include such women in the history of heterosexuality without proof of such an identity.⁴

And what of bisexual history? Vicinus asks, "How are we to define a married woman who falls in love with a woman?" Her solution seems to be to classify such a woman under the rubric "lesbian-like," arguing that lesbian or lesbian-like conduct can both be a part of, and apart from, heterosexual marriage and childbearing. This version of the lesbian continuum gives little space to other modes of sexual being that are neither "lesbian-like" nor "hetero-like" but that are, rather, bisexual. And surely it comes dangerously close to the idea that bisexual women are actually heterosexual women "flirting" with lesbianism, an impression I am sure Vicinus does not intend to create.⁵

The "not said" and the "not seen" may also be important conceptual tools in the history of bisexuality, which, in an even more dramatic way than lesbian history, remains stuck in the quagmire of "identity" and "proof." Bisexual history has suffered the double burden of heterocentric and homocentric colonization of its sources and its literature. Be it in the reduction of sexuality to the physical realm of sex, or in the desire to emphasize heterosexuality *or* homosexuality in a given source, bisexual lives have been obscured in the pursuit of an oppressive dichotomy. Because of its insistence on genital contact and visible characteristics, queer history has largely excluded bisexuality, assuming instead that the coexistence of heterosexual and homosexual activity or desire in the same individual is merely the manifestation of the struggle to come to terms with a "true" lesbian or gay sexual orientation.

³ Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?," *Radical History Review* 60 (Fall 1994): 57-75.

⁴ Jeffreys, "Does It Matter If They Did It?," 19-28.

⁵ Ibid.

This article focuses on the journals and correspondence of Constance Grey Swartz, a middle-class BC woman whose personal papers reveal a complex sexual subjectivity with a bisexual orientation.⁶ The Swartz papers employ multiple layers of discourse to express, explain, and conceal aspects of their author's sexuality. Early twentieth-century discourse on respectability heavily influences the surface level of the journals. Constance Grey⁷ employs a superficial and "appropriate" voice when describing daily social events and the personalities of those she meets. Beneath this level, however, she negotiates between the societal norms surrounding her and her own subjectivity. Her rebellion against respectable domesticity is revealed in both the journals and the correspondence. While important, accounts of rebellion against domesticity are not unknown. What is striking about these papers, however, is evidence of bisexual desire.⁸

The journals and the correspondence reveal that Constance Grey expressed herself passionately in language and also, I maintain, in her sexual life with both men and women. That she married twice and bore a child does not negate the intensity of her passion for women; nor does her lifelong commitment to women negate the fact of her pleasure in relationships with men. Furthermore, she does not express such emotions as shame, fear, or regret regarding sexuality. Neither heterosexual nor lesbian desire dominates these papers; rather, her early journals and correspondence demonstrate an aesthetic and erotic appreciation of both men and women, and they suggest that she was, in fact, bisexual.⁹

Such an interpretation does not rest on "proof" of Constance having had genital contact with either women *or* men; in fact, the only proof of genital contact is the birth of her son. What her journals and correspondence provide us with, however, is evidence of her desires and evidence that some form of passionate relationship occurred between

⁶ I do not claim that Constance Grey Swartz identified as bisexual but, rather, that her desires were bisexual.

⁷ As this article focuses on the period before Constance Grey's marriage to Ira Swartz, she will henceforth be referred to as "Constance Grey" or "Constance."

⁸ While this article focuses on the life of one middle-class anglophone woman whose experience is not necessarily generalizable to women of other classes or to francophone women, the richness and detail of this particular collection allows us to make at least tentative arguments about the processes by which women constructed their sexual subjectivity in the face of dominant attitudes regarding sexuality and gender. It is part of a larger study that uses other such written sources in combination with oral testimonies to examine the construction of desire and sexual identity in early twentieth-century Canada.

⁹ Constance's surviving friends and family members are in agreement with this conclusion. Letter, D.S. to Karen Duder, 1 March 1997.

Constance and several men and women. What is clear from this collection is that she perceived equally the physical attractiveness of both sexes and that, in several instances, she acted upon her attractions.

The precise nature of Constance's relationships remains unknown to us, but this source is nevertheless indicative of the value of the "not said" and the "not seen." There are few visual clues: occasionally playing with androgyny, she also liked to engage in strenuous physical activities, some of which were unusual for a woman. Her behaviour and appearance were not interpreted by her family as unnatural, however.¹⁰ Moreover, she did not express a self-identified sexual orientation. What makes her journals useful is her discussion of her relationships with lovers, friends, family, and acquaintances. The journal entries, supported by correspondence from friends and lovers, indicate an active sexual curiosity and passion that was expressed physically with both men and women.

The collection itself comprises daily journals; inward and some outward correspondence; French lessons and notebooks; materials relating to the arts; copies of the title pages of a personal book collection; and files relating to the Gulf Islands. Part of the collection had been destroyed prior to recovery, and only a few of the journals are extant; namely, those for 1923, 1930-2, 1947, 1956-7, 1961, and 1970-81.¹¹ In addition to Constance's thoughts and observations, the journals contain lengthy quotations from inward correspondence and are a valuable complement to the correspondence files. The use of nicknames throughout much of the correspondence from personal friends makes the identification of some individuals difficult. For the purposes of this analysis, however, which concentrates on the sexuality expressed in the journals and correspondence, the identification of all individuals is not necessary.¹²

Constance Grey was born on 16 January 1902 at Victoria, the daughter of Ralph Geoffrey Grey and Winifred Grace Spalding Higgs Grey,

¹⁰ A family member suggested that she was merely "theatrical."

¹¹ The Swartz Papers were recovered in 1988 by historian Richard Mackie, who was working part-time as a garbage collector on Pender Island, British Columbia. D.S., a friend of Constance, reports that her possessions had been held by a friend at the time of her death. The friend eventually contacted D.S.'s brother and said that she wanted the papers destroyed but that the family should check them first. When Richard Mackie, who was working with him on garbage pickup, recognized the historical value of the collection, Constance's family and friends decided to submit the material to the provincial archives. Some very personal material was first destroyed. Letter, D.S. to Karen Duder, 1 March 1997. I am indebted to Richard Mackie for having brought this collection to my attention.

¹² This article is based on a preliminary survey of the Swartz journals and correspondence. The journals are extensive, and at least one-third of the entries are written in shorthand.

both of whom were English immigrants. Her father was a cousin of the governor general and a nephew of Josephine Butler, the English leader of the movement against the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Greys had a tradition of interest in political and cultural affairs and were socialist in political inclination.¹³ When Ralph Grey was eight years old, his widowed father remarried, and Ralph was sent to boarding school. He left at age thirteen to train for the merchant marine service, and at fifteen he became a midshipman. He subsequently bought and farmed Samuel Island in British Columbia, where Constance Grey spent her first eight years. After the Greys moved to Vancouver in the 1920s, Ralph Grey continued the family tradition of socialism, joining the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) along with his second daughter, Evelyn.¹⁴

Winifred Higgs came from the elite upper middle class of Suffolk. Her family was politically more conservative than that of Ralph Grey, but when Winifred was twelve her mother had had the courage to separate from her father, an uncommon occurrence in middle-class families in the late nineteenth century. After a holiday together in British Columbia in 1896, Winifred and her sister Mabel found their lives as governesses in England restrictive.¹⁵ They adopted a recently orphaned girl and returned to live on South Pender Island in 1897. Winifred married Ralph Grey in 1900 and moved to Samuel Island and, in 1902, gave birth to Constance. In 1910, following the departure of Mabel and her husband, Martin Grainger, to Victoria, Winifred and her family moved to Esquimalt.¹⁶

The shorthand portions of the journals include mundane information as well as Constance's reflections on her relationships with a variety of people, including family members.

¹³ British Columbia Archives and Records Services, Constance Grey Swartz Papers (hereafter Swartz), Add. MSS. 2767; Marie Elliott, ed., *Winifred Grey: A Gentlewoman's Remembrances of Life in England and the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, 1871-1910* (Victoria: Gulf Islands Press, 1995), 183.

¹⁴ Elliott, *Winifred Grey*, 150, 183.

¹⁵ Winifred Higgs wrote "Not knowing the first thing about long-distance travelling, we decided to go under the auspices of a Society, which provided a matron and cheap fares for girls who, as a rule, were going to take positions as domestic help in towns or on the Prairies." Elliott, *Winifred Grey*, 101. In the late nineteenth century, thousands of middle-class women left Britain for the colonies. Increasingly limited opportunities for suitable employment and the rigidity of relations of class and gender resulted in many immigrating to parts of the world they hoped would offer better prospects, both materially and socially. Some of them went to Canada. See, for example: A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Jackie Lay, "To Columbia on the Tynemouth: The Emigration of Single Women and Girls in 1862," in *In Her Own Right*, ed. Barbara Latham and Kathy Kess (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), 19-41; and Susan Jackel, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Elliott, *Winifred Grey*, vii-xiii.

Constance Grey (whose nickname throughout much of her life was "Conti" or "Contie") and her sister Evelyn ("Evie") were educated at St. Margaret's School in Victoria. She later spent two years at finishing school in England and completed her education in France. In addition, she attended a commercial course at Victoria High, where she acquired her skills in shorthand.¹⁷ Apart from her commercial subjects, she took subjects regarded as appropriate to a young woman of her class (e.g., history, French, and German). The existence of a physiology notebook for 1923 illustrates her interests in science as well as the arts.¹⁸

Despite the Greys' middle-class status, they lacked wealth for much of their daughters' upbringing. The Grey sisters were able to attend St. Margaret's School only because their parents were not required to pay tuition fees.¹⁹ Constance Grey's education was obviously important to her parents, however, as is indicated by her attendance at finishing school. Despite their financial stresses, the Greys ensured that she acquired an education befitting a young woman of her class. Her taking a commercial course at Victoria High may reflect the Greys' desire for their daughter to have a means of supporting herself until marriage instead of relying upon their moderate income, or it may reflect her own desire to join the increasing numbers of women seeking paid employment before and even during marriage. Commercial courses had been available in British Columbia since the late nineteenth century and were well established by the interwar period. Most early twentieth-century "vocational" schooling has been described as "working class" but, as Jackson and Gaskell indicate, those enrolled in high school commercial education came from "financially stable families of the native-born, English-speaking population, and not from the poor, industrial working classes."²⁰

While the home was still considered the proper place for a woman, in the early twentieth century it was becoming more acceptable for women to enter a period of paid employment before marriage. The feminization of clerical work opened up employment opportunities, although wage rates were low and it was expected that a woman would

¹⁷ Swartz, box 12, file 2, resumé, n.d.

¹⁸ Ibid., box 1, file 1.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Conti's friends and family for this information.

²⁰ Nancy S. Jackson and Jane S. Gaskell, "White Collar Vocationalism: The Rise of Commercial Education in Ontario and British Columbia," in *Gender and Education in Ontario*, ed. Ruby Heap and Alison Prentice (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1991), 186.

leave her position immediately upon marriage. In the interwar years, a number of opportunities arose for the single, educated, and middle-class woman who lacked professional qualifications. "Pink-collar" work as a stenographer, a sales clerk, or a journalist was deemed appropriate for a young woman with an education, and Constance Grey's training provided skills she would need at several points in her life.²¹

On 27 May 1926 Constance Grey married Barnard Box, an Englishman who worked as a timekeeper in the logging industry. Their son, Rollo, was born in 1928. She divorced Barnard Box in June 1933 on the grounds of adultery, although the marriage had disintegrated prior to her discovery of this fact. She changed her name back to Grey and that of her son to Rollo Grey. In 1934 she married an American-born pianist, Ira Swartz. She divorced again in 1946, after a three-year separation, and never remarried. Throughout the next three decades of her life, she continued to have relationships with men, though it appears from her papers that these did not last more than a few months or years at a time. She died in 1981.

The focus of this article is the period between 1923 and 1934, which covers the time Constance Grey spent in England and France as well as her marriage to Barnard Box. The journals and letters from this period, perhaps more than most, reveal the ways in which the young Constance was constituted by the discourse of respectable heterosexuality – and the ways in which she challenged it. The journal of 1923 begins with her arrival in France and describes her education and many of the activities accepted as necessary to the cultural refinement of a young middle-class woman. She practised her French and attended the theatre, concerts, exhibitions, dances, and tennis matches.

The entries from France reveal a young woman whose social expectations blended concepts of respectability with the exploration of sexual relations. She enjoyed the French countryside, spending much of her time walking and riding: "Trotting, galloping, racing, walking; up one track, down another, cool & shady with overhanging branches; out into sunshine again – no hat; shirt & pants – free & heavenly ... Boat in afts. Hair down & soaking & saturating in

²¹ For information on the clerical employment of women in the early twentieth century, see Jackson and Gaskell, "White Collar Vocationalism." See also Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Markham, ON: Penguin, 1988), 42 and 53; Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 4 (1979): 131-64; and Graham S. Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

sunshine; filling my London-clogged lungs with sun & fresh air – divine existence – ideal life – perfect weather – fine every – & all day; clear, starlit nights.”²² Constance’s time in France was also an education in French customs and etiquette. She commented that it was “funny to have spent 2 years in Eng. learning to spoon my soup & tip my plate *away* from me; & drink out of the side of the spoon; & now I come here and find the method and procedure exactly reversed!”²³

But Constance’s feelings of confinement were expressed on several occasions. Perhaps feeling her social life to be somewhat limited by circumstances, she wrote: “I *adore* a saxophone, well-played. So yearning and soul-rending. L.V. [Lydie, the daughter of the French couple with whom she stayed] and I sit and listen in an agony of rapture, and cast our eyes heavenwards, stirring our shoulders, unable to express our feelings and pining to be at a real dance with he-males.”²⁴ The comment about “he-males” most probably has to do with the girls’ admiration of the more masculine type of man.

While interested in the company of men, she was also sharply critical of their social graces and attitudes. Denis Harrison, a young visitor, “improves??? – well no, – changes – on acquaintance. He is only 17 and flirtatiousness doesn’t sit well on his ruddy countenance. But he likes to be thought rather hot and snappy stuff, and gives you to understand he is quite up in the game and has done it for years and years, what?!! He has threatened to kiss me many times but hasn’t as yet!!!! In fact is thoroughly sloppy and sentimental. He said the other day ‘You girls you know, are all different.’ (I wondered how many he had done ditto to!) so I said ‘You boys are all cut out on one pattern,’ a feeble remark, but still.”²⁵

The physical attributes of the men Constance and her friends met were discussed in some detail. Her friend “Insect” (Constance was also called “Insect” in this friendship) wrote in 1923 about her current emotional attachment, “Puggy,” who had “dark, kinky, coy hair, and gray eyes that are my undoing – big and well-made. He rows for New Coll. and hopes to get his blue this year. he has a motorbike and races at Brooklands under a *nom de plume*. There are heaps, literally, of coy undergrads ... yet they are shadows compared to Puggy.”²⁶ Constance and her friends were interested in relationships

²² Swartz, box 1, file 1, journal, 4 August 1923.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9 August 1923.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 August 1923.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 August 1923.

²⁶ Swartz, box 13, file 2, “Insect” to Constance Grey, 29 October 1923.

with men who were respectable, clean, educated, and personable but whom they also found physically and sexually attractive. While being “of the right sort” was important, they also felt attracted to men who represented danger, challenge, and physicality.

The discourse of respectability, limiting the social circles in which they moved and the men whom they were permitted or likely to meet, and maintaining that young women of their class should consider only men of a certain intellectual and moral type, restricted their choices in sexual partners. Respectability required that young women be chaste and modest. And yet Constance and her friends did consider men in terms of their physicality, sensuality, and sexual ability, which suggests that the discourse did not wholly control their thoughts or their communications with each other.

Little information is available concerning Constance’s sexual and emotional relationships with men before her marriage to Barney Box as the journals for this period have not survived. That sexuality was important to Constance, however, and that her friends regarded her as a sexual person, is clear from the tone of a letter from Constance’s friend “Molly,” who, upon hearing of Constance’s engagement, asked: “What would you like for a wedding present, by the bye? In view of your love of books and *other things*, I suggest a complete set of the works of Marie Stopes. But no! Let’s not be coarse on this happy occasion!!”²⁷ The journals do not reveal exactly how familiar Constance was with the work of Marie Stopes, the leading British advocate of contraception and fertility control. It is almost certain, however, that she knew of Stopes and other family limitation activists from the *British Columbia Federationist*, to which her family subscribed and to which her father wrote regularly on social issues. The campaign for family limitation was discussed regularly in the *Federationist* throughout 1923, 1924, and 1925.²⁸

A year before her engagement to Barney Box, Constance had had an intimate relationship with “Patsy,” an Aboriginal cowboy she met while on a ranching vacation in the Chilcotin. Patsy wrote to Constance of his love for her but cited race and class as barriers to that love:

²⁷ Swartz, Box 1, File 12, File 5, “Molly” to Constance Grey Swartz, 30 March 1926; emphasis added.

²⁸ Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880-1980* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1986), 62-3.

Dearest Contie:

It is with a broken hart that I write this letter. I would have told you long ago only Im not worthy of your love Contie ... Dearest friend as I can only call you a friend now I was going to tell you that I loved you last fall when I was in the Hospetial & then you came one night & showed me the photo of Lord Grey & said he was your Cousion Contie I could.nt tell you then. you a lady & a cousion to a Lord & what was I only a cowboy & not a *white man* at that. dont you remember I said I was different from thoes other men well that is what I ment the Pain in my hand was nothing to the pain that was in my hart that was why I said the sooner I left Vancouver the better I am doing wrong by telling now but I cant help myself if I was a white man & had went to school I would have asked you to be my wife last summer.²⁹

The nature of Constance's reply is not known, but it would appear that she was upset by Patsy's letter. He wrote again in June 1925 and apologized for having hurt her feelings but reiterated that "its just because Im not a white man you know yourself when your Dad took me to the hospital they put me in with the Chinaman." Patsy further emphasized that "if you had married me your Dad & Ma would die with shame. even tho Im not a white man if you ever need a true friend one who will give all & ask for nothing you will know where to find one."³⁰ Constance married Barnard Box the following year but maintained a frequent and affectionate correspondence with Patsy for some time.

It is unclear whether the relationship between Constance and Patsy was a physical one, but it nevertheless crossed the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable relationships between Aboriginal peoples and Whites. While theories about the inability of other races to control their sexual appetites referred most explicitly to Chinese and Black men, concerns about interracial sexual relationships also underwrote racism towards Aboriginal peoples.³¹ Regarding the nineteenth century, however, Adele Perry has suggested that:

More often, the notion that white women were boundary markers between races meant that sex of any sort between white women and First Nations men was constructed as literally impossible ... It was

²⁹ Swartz, box 13, file 24, "Patsy" to Constance Grey, 12 May 1925.

³⁰ Ibid., 3 June 1925.

³¹ Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1991), 104-8.

this assumption that was later codified in Canada's 1876 *Indian Act* which, while carefully planning for relationships between First Nations women and settler men, does not imagine the possibility of intimacy between Aboriginal men and white women.³²

Whether or not the occurrence of sexual relationships between White women and Aboriginal men was public knowledge and subject to negative public comment by the 1920s, it is obvious from Patsy's letters that he was fully aware of the divisions between them and the consequences of pursuing the relationship further. Constance, although obviously upset, was content to remain friends with him.

Constance's relationships with women were as passionate as were her relationships with men. While in France, she had developed a close relationship with Lydie. They danced, listened to music, rode, and walked together. At one point, Constance recalled in her journal how she had had to rush out of Lydie's bedroom by the back door, feeling breathless, while Lydie's father came in at the front. Lydie had been telling her a romantic fantasy about a woman.³³ The two young women would spend long hours dancing together, Constance taking the "masculine" role. Constance suffered from sore feet, however, and on one occasion was unable to dance. "Now my foot won't let me dance," she wrote. "I sit & impersonate a bored male at a table in a cabaret; or a lonesome, lame bachelor, pining for petting; while L. vamps me or breaks my heart!"³⁴

Constance's androgynous appearance was tolerated by her hosts in France. She sometimes favoured a style of dress that earned her teasing from Lydie's family and friends. On one occasion she wore a "navy gabardine suit; white silk blouse; P. Pan collar with black bow tie; Gooch's Auntie Bee 3 gn. lid; gray gloves, gray stockings & Chillingham suade shoes. They kept saying I looked like a 'bad boy.'"³⁵ The teasing did not offend her: she was to wear this costume on several subsequent occasions.

It would appear that Lydie was not the only young woman with whom Constance shared a passionate relationship while she was overseas. One month before hearing of Insect's new love, Constance had written about her "darling Insect! I get quite lump-in-froaty

³² Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 177.

³³ Swartz, box 1, file 1, journal, 4 September 1923.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Swartz, box 1, file 1, journal, 20 August 1923.

[when I] think of her! Oohhh! *Imagine* when we meet again!”³⁶ And Insect, before telling Constance about “Puggy,” lamented “My most darling & wonderful Insect ... Insect I want you so – no one can ever take your place & I’m just longing to pour out things to you, it’s dreadful to be so near & yet so far. I wish we could just curl up together on your bed at 1703 Leighton Rd ... I think he cares & oh Insect it has never been like this before. How dreadful it seems to write it, but you said confess, & anyhow I always tell you everything just because you’re Insect – *my own dear priceless insect.*”³⁷

Further evidence of Constance’s passionate relationships with women comes from a letter received in May 1925. While the journals for that year no longer exist, and no other letter remains extant to establish the identity of the author, the nickname accords with that used by a guest present at one of Constance’s women’s tea gatherings in 1931. The author, who signed the letter “Daffy,” wrote:

My Own Darling Sweetheart:

Just a line to say that I had to come home as Hilda is very ill and sent for me. So you see sweetheart I had to come.

Believe me Conti Darling I love only you and wont be Happy until I am with you. But I am awfully afraid that that wont be until August when I come back from the North.

Sweetheart I cant write a long letter now I dont want anyone here to know that I am writing to you as it would cause one Hell of a fuss. I dont think that you had better write to me again until I go up North. I will write and let you know when I am leaving and my address. All my love My Darling Sweetheart My Loving Sweetheart from Daffy.³⁸

Female friends reacted with some surprise when Constance announced her engagement in 1926 to Barney Box (nicknamed “Felix”). Constance’s friend Esther wrote: “My Queen of Love-birds ... Felix sounds quite the bees knees. Would I could meet him. If he succeeds in keeping you in the straight-shadow path of matrimony he’ll have proved his worth. Nevertheless if I were a he-man I’d like to be him.”³⁹ This reference to Constance’s sexuality is echoed in a letter from “Molly,” who wrote:

³⁶ Ibid., 1 September 1923.

³⁷ Swartz, box 13, file 2, “Insect” to Constance Grey, 29 October 1923.

³⁸ Swartz, box 12, file 5, “Daffy” to Constance Grey, 2 May 1925.

³⁹ Swartz, box 14, file 30, “Esther” to Constance Grey Swartz, 17 May 1926.

I do so rejoice over your happiness goily mine, and although all the bottom of the universe has dropped out for me (Conti, how *can* I let him have you?) I'm trying hard to be brave and not *too* selfish, and to be just glad for your sake. Only, I'm filled with misgivings too, because although your Felix sounds just too sweet, I don't see how he can possibly be good enough for you. You are sure, aren't you, best beloved, that you do really love him better'n all the world, and not just because he's nice and one-of-us, and most of the other people round you aren't? ... Conti darling DARLING!! How I want you ... Your Molly."⁴⁰

The subject of sex was freely discussed by Constance and her friends in this early correspondence. One of Constance's most prolific correspondents, "Goilie," wrote in 1930:

Funny how all my girl friends seem anxious for me to have affairs with their husbands! I'm not sure I like that either: seems a left-handed sort of compliment, somehow. There's Peggy, urging me to vamp Larry. Says she thinks it will do him good, forsooth! The trouble is, I'm not at all sure I want to just now. We all slept in the same room as usual and while Peggy was getting brekka Larry crushed into bed with me and cuddled me. I like the cuddling, but firmly suppressed the first sign Larry showed of wishing to break into rudeness. Must be losing my B.V. Maybe even a C-bird wouldn't be able to get me unbuttoned now.⁴¹

This last reference to "C-bird" further suggests the physicality of Constance's relationships with women: "C-bird" was one of Constance's nicknames.⁴² It is unclear when exactly Constance got Goily "unbuttoned," and to what degree.

Constance continued in her journals of 1930-32 to express her admiration for women in very physical terms, despite living in a heterosexual marriage. Her journal entry for 17 March 1931 mentions that she went to "The Capitol" to see "the one & only Garbo in 'Inspiration' [with] Bob Montgomery, Lewis Stone, Marjorie R. She is *too* lovely; too divine. I wept pitifully ... couldn't bear it. Her acting

⁴⁰ Swartz, box 12, file 5, "Molly" to Constance Grey Swartz, 30 March 1926.

⁴¹ Swartz, box 1, file 2, journal, 8 January 1930, quotation from correspondence, "Goilie" to Constance Grey, 12 December 1929.

⁴² Ibid., February 1931. Conti referred in her journal to her husband having written of his "own C-bird sitting (or should I say roosting) in his deck chair." Conti was nicknamed "Birdie" from birth, and it would appear that a version of the nickname had remained with her into adulthood. Elliott, *Winifred Grey*, 159.

is too wonderful. Gaily saw it a week ago [and commented that] 'R.M. Undoubtedly has S.A. [Sex Appeal] but a weak face.' He certainly has – & how he has it! ... But Greta's voice! What a woman. 100% more lovely [than] Marlene. I'd say Marlene is physical appeal; Greta more mental appeal. Anyway she's perfect."⁴³ A few days later, recalling a weekend trip to Vancouver, Constance commented on two of the women she had met: "Josephine is lovely too; very, very pretty; scarlet rouged lips & fluffy hair longbowed behind her ears. Same with Billie ... beautiful body: a really lovely girl."⁴⁴ The physicality of this language is not unusual for her descriptions of other women.

By far the majority of Constance's life was spent in relationships with men, however. Her first marriage lasted seven years, although Barney spent much of that time working in logging camps. Neither the journals nor the correspondence between Constance and Barney between 1926 and 1930 are extant. Inward correspondence regarding their marriage suggests that, when Constance wrote to her friends of her engagement and marriage, she did so in effusive terms and that she and Barney were very much in love. Even by 1930, when Barney had been more absent than present, had been fired from two jobs, and repeatedly stole the money Constance had earned at the stenographer's job she had been forced to take to support herself and Rollo, Constance wrote in her journal that she missed him and that she found the bed lonely and empty when he left.

The initial passion in Constance's marriage was not enough to sustain it in the face of Barney's neglect and the pressure from her family to conform to respectable domesticity. Constance's family initially took Barney's side in the disputes that arose between them. In April 1931, Constance's family visited her en masse

to have a talk. Sounded familiar ... the whole family piled in while Dad took Rollo for a walk. Settled myself in bed with sox to darn and M. [Constance's uncle Martin Grainger] started in. How he'd been worrying over Rollo for a long time, etc., and then ensued a barrage of dramatics and exaggeration that was really pathetic; very unpleasant. I kept quite calm, didn't interrupt and let him talk himself out. Can hardly remember any of it, it was so fantastic and exaggerated: repeated harped on "paper bag feeding" for R. – that I didn't bother with his diet. "Shameful neglect"; "putting pleasure

⁴³ Swartz, box 1, file 2, Journal, 17 March 1931.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 March 1931.

before Rollo's interests"; "bored stiff with Rollo"; "longing for social activities and sophisticated life"; "bored having a child; novelty has worn off"; "cause of Barney losing two jobs"; "alter will"; "make myself as unpleasant as possible until you can see way of looking at it" etc. Too pitiable, and very hard on me ... I thought it was crude bringing in about a will (not that I took much of it in) and using it as a threat for good behaviour. I do things because I think they are right, not for future reward. As if the threat of having a will altered would have the slightest effect on me! Monnie said since "coming under our observation, during the last 4 months," he has noticed all these evil qualities and that I seemed "to be making a parade of them." I asked how he thought my character had suddenly changed from being the model wife and mother I was during the years in camp, to being utterly incompetent now?⁴⁵

Unfortunately, Constance does not make clear in her journal if the "evil qualities" referred to were those of "bad" mothering and lack of marital loyalty or whether they were related to sexuality.

The journal entries for 1930-32 are especially poignant. While missing Barney's company, Constance gradually reconciled herself to her increasing dissatisfaction with him as a husband. The entries reveal periods of depression and self-doubt, during which she weighed her feelings of obligation to Barney against those of anger and frustration. During the month of February 1932 she came to her decision to divorce him. All physical passion had died, and she realized that she no longer loved him. She wrote: "I was deathly tired after a super hellish a.m. at the office and a very full day. He was disappointed because I did not show more affection but after what I've been through in the past year due to him, I don't feel a terrific amount of affection. In the past when he's been out of town I have had to crush down my love and longing and loneliness or I'd have gone mad and now those feelings are pretty well subdued: I have ceased to love and therefore don't long or feel unduly lonely."⁴⁶ By this time, Constance's family had seen that she was not at fault in the relationship, and the women in particular were supportive of her move to divorce Barney.

It might be argued that these textual fragments from Constance's life provide insufficient evidence that she was bisexual, attesting instead to "romantic friendships," the kind of which were common

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Swartz, box 1, file 3, journal, 13 February 1932.

among women of the middle class in the nineteenth century. Certainly, no definitive statement can be made concerning whether or not Constance's physical relationships with women were extended to a genital sexuality. Nor did she on any occasion in her journals consciously identify or categorize her sexuality or question herself about the morality of her feelings towards either sex. Moreover, it would appear from the inward correspondence and the journals that her later relationships with women were not physical ones.

Given the absence of sexual explicitness, such as that found in the diaries of Anne Lister,⁴⁷ it is impossible to accurately determine the nature of Constance's sexual practices with women. The few entries in this survey of the early journals and correspondence often use phraseology similar to that used in nineteenth-century romantic friendships; there might or might not be a physical background to them. Nevertheless, those entries that do suggest physicality as well as emotion do so quite strongly. In particular, that "C-bird" got "Goily" unbuttoned at some point in their friendship suggests at least the undressing of one another, even if not genital contact. It is not inconceivable that Constance, at some point in her passionate friendships with Lydie, Goily, Molly, and Daffy, discovered "the interesting sensations attendant on genital friction and [explored] the possibility of improving on the sensations."⁴⁸ Then again, they may never have engaged in genital friction but might instead have caressed each other's breasts and kissed. I argue here that such practices constitute a physical sexuality.

Nor can we be clear on the extent of her genital sexual contact with men. While there was certainly an active sexuality between Constance and her husband, this was rendered problematic by his frequent absence. Constance would not have been immune to the trend towards greater knowledge about contraception and the importance of a fulfilling sexual life within marriage. She was familiar with the work of Marie Stopes, and if one assumes that she and Barney Box were sexually active after Rollo's birth, then either that sexuality must have taken some non-procreative form or contraception must have been used. We must therefore also be careful not to assume the nature of Constance's sexual practices with men: these may or may not have been genital.

⁴⁷ Helena Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992). Lister devised an extensive vocabulary for her sexual practices and created a code in which to write about her sexual experiences with women.

⁴⁸ Jeffreys, "Does It Matter," 19-28.

Constance's exploration of masculinity in dress and behaviour in France and elsewhere is also indicative of her transgression of normative gender roles. While her hosts in France seemed amused by her attire, it is interesting to note that she did not resent their teasing and, further, that when dancing with Lydie she would always take the masculine role. Constance was a person who loved to act and considered herself one of the avant-garde, and her occasional cross-dressing might therefore be nothing more than recreation.⁴⁹ It does, however, illustrate that Constance did not always feel herself to be bound by the constraints of normative femininity.

The tolerance of passionate female friendships that had existed before the rise of sexology had, by the time Constance travelled abroad, gasped what Faderman has termed "the last breath of innocence" and had given way to a discourse that concentrated on relations between women as "abnormal."⁵⁰ The terms used publicly to describe lesbian relations were now largely negative, and lesbian and bisexual women had to seek new ways of constituting themselves as sexual subjects either in relation or in opposition to the new, medical discourse.⁵¹ George Chauncey and others have argued that there occurred in the 1910s and 1920s a "Heterosexual Counterrevolution." This was evident in both medical literature and the broader culture, and it was in part a reaction to women's challenges to prevailing gender norms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The new discourse both emphasized heterosexual matrimony as healthy and happy, and undermined same-sex group activities and, particularly, same-sex relationships. Feminism and the New Woman became associated with lesbianism in popular culture and in medical and political discourse, and expression of affection and attraction between women was no longer noble and natural but, rather, was a sign of abnormality, either congenital or psychological.⁵²

⁴⁹ Letter, D.S. to Karen Duder, 1 March 1997.

⁵⁰ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 297–313.

⁵¹ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3–4.

⁵² George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female 'Deviance'," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, with Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 87–117; Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 332–40; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870–1936," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey (New York: Meridian, 1990), 264–80.

The language of sexology, while demonstrably valuable in enabling some lesbians and gay men to identify their own feelings, form an identity, and find community with others, does not appear to have been adopted by Constance.⁵³ In her journals Constance did not express any shame about her feelings for women, nor is there evidence that she internalized the arguments of Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis (i.e., that relationships between women represented an “inversion” of normal sexuality) or the later arguments of Freud.⁵⁴ It is arguable that she knew of their writings, however, as she read widely and was obviously familiar with other works concerning sexual relations. Moreover, it is likely that she was familiar with the controversy surrounding Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which was publicized in Canada as well as in Britain thanks to the lengthy obscenity trial that surrounded it. In addition to newspaper coverage of the trial, reviews of *The Well of Loneliness* were published in a variety of periodicals. One such was the *Canadian Forum*, to which Constance refers on several occasions in her journals.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the fact that it does not appear that Constance’s family commented on her relationships with women and, therefore, perhaps had not noticed them, and the fact that her comments on relationships are sometimes mediated by a shorthand form of language in her journals, suggests a certain tension between what Constance thought she could express publicly and what had to remain private. Many of her thoughts about men remained private as they, too, contravened rules of modesty and decorum. The language she used to describe both women and men was equally physical in nature: both sexes were described not only in terms of personality and dress but also in terms of their individual physical characteristics and the overall aesthetics of their bodies. She was more able, however, to express her longing for Barney before their marriage soured, and more inclined to link her overall state of mind to his presence or absence, than she was to express deep and long-held emotions towards women.

⁵³ See, for example, Elsa Gidlow, *I Come with My Songs: The Autobiography of Elsa Gidlow* (San Francisco: Bootlegger, 1986); Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*; Faderman, “The Morbidification of Love between Women by 19th-Century Sexologists,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 4 (1978): 73–90; and Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” in Duberman et al., *Hidden from History*, 281–93.

⁵⁴ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (New York: Surgeons Book Co., 1925 [1882]); Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1911 [1897]).

⁵⁵ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Cape, 1928). See also Steven Maynard, “Radclyffe Hall in Canada,” *Centre/Fold* 6 (Spring 1994): 9.

This is not to suggest that, for Constance, relationships with women were necessarily secondary to those with men. I would argue instead that Constance was made well aware by her class and her education that there were limits to the tolerance of female independence and sexuality in the 1920s and 1930s. Her journals and correspondence reveal an awareness of the sharpness of the division between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. She chose for herself neither the role of conformist nor that of rebel, maintaining her commitment to women but ultimately spending the greater portion of her life in heterosexual relationships. That she did so does not negate the intensity, physicality, and passion of her relationships with women.

Even the Grey family, whose political beliefs and education imparted to Constance attitudes at variance with those of others of her class, attempted to move Constance in the direction of heterosexual domesticity when she appeared to stray from it. It is tempting to see Constance as unusual among women of her class, and to a degree that is true, but it is also true that, despite her atypical approach to marriage and motherhood, she was nevertheless circumscribed by a gender role that asserted that her place was in the home rather than the workplace, that she raise her son in a certain way, that she not criticize her husband, and that her earnings be given over to her husband.

The relationship between Constance's own norms of sexuality and those espoused by her family and society at large is one of interconnectedness, of conformity *and* resistance. Did her journal take the form of the confessional – the form that Foucault has seen as central to the proliferation of sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?⁵⁶ To a degree, perhaps. Constance expressed her sexuality only to friends, lovers, and her most intimate confidante of all, her journal. That expression took forms quite different from her other modes of language. To some extent, therefore, Constance confessed her sexuality to herself and, in so doing, made herself a subject. The use of a private language to describe her sexuality became her resistance, her self-definition, in the midst of heterosexual hegemony; but it was also an act of self-censorship.

Constance Swartz endured family rejection, the expropriation of her income, emotional abuse, and the eventual suppression of physically expressed desire for women. These were all manifestations of the psychological violence experienced by many women. But perhaps the

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 67.

more pervasive violence occurred at the level of language, in Constance's struggle within herself to express feelings that were in contradiction to the gender norms surrounding her. Her strategy became to reserve the most rebellious, the most opinionated, and the most dangerous parts of herself to the worlds of her correspondence, her journal, and shorthand. The latter may in part be due to the fact that members of her family could not read shorthand, but it also suggests a constant negotiation between positive and negative self-images expressed in conflicting voices throughout her journals. Such a tension between positive self-definition and self-repression illustrates the complex relationship between more coercive discourses surrounding gender and sex, and the sexual self-definition of women subject to them.

The papers of Constance Grey Swartz illustrate the dangers both of ignoring the degree to which women of the middle class were constrained by the discourses surrounding sexuality and gender, and of underestimating the degree to which they resisted them. While it was predominantly the members of the middle class who were promulgating these discourses, they were themselves subject to the same behavioural restraints they sought to impose upon others. However, wherever these mechanisms of power exist, there is also resistance. As Karen Dubinsky has argued, patriarchy is never maintained by coercion alone. Sexuality could be an area of danger, but Constance Swartz "carved out sexual territory" in both action and language.⁵⁷

While Victorian standards of sexuality were beginning to change in the early twentieth century, it was still the case that freedom of sexual expression, particularly for women, was extremely limited. In their interactions with men, women were expected to be modest and chaste before marriage, and after marriage they were subject to the sexual whims of their husbands. The rise of the "companionate marriage" did little to change the fundamental belief in the male ownership of female sexuality. While in the new century it was more commonly believed that women did in fact have a sexuality of their own (rather than merely being incubators for new generations), they could only express it through intercourse within marriage – intercourse that, moreover, was supposed to be solely for the purposes of

⁵⁷ Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 163-4; and Karen Dubinsky, "'Maidenly Girls' or 'Designing Women'? The Crime of Seduction in Turn-of-the-Century Ontario," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 28-9.

procreation. At the public level, this restrictive discourse certainly held sway. Few women advocated female sexuality, fertility, contraception, and extramarital sex, and those who did were vilified in the press, in medical journals, and in the political arena. But in the "private" world of women's own thoughts, in their marriages, and in their relationships with each other, the dominant discourse was undermined, reshaped, and rebelled against.

The unnamed subject, genital sexuality, sits in the wings in the texts of Constance's journals and correspondence. The presence of a language of devotion and passion between Constance and her female friends, and the evidence of at least some physical expression that transgressed the boundaries of friendship, leaves us wanting to ask whether or not she "did it." It is in this way that the thing not said and not seen acts as the ultimate transgression. But surely the very asking of the question itself pigeonholes Constance and once again limits the range of queer history. For Constance to be validated as "queer," whether lesbian or bisexual, she must, in the absence of her own testimony of "queerness," be seen to have "done it." The same requirement does not exist of her "straightness": it is taken as sufficient that she was married and had a child.

These papers stand as a caution against both heterocentrism and homocentrism in the history of sexuality. It would be possible to describe them in terms of middle-class romantic friendships between women and to argue that Constance underwent a phase of female attachments before finally marrying and settling into a heterosexual lifestyle. It would also be possible to argue that Constance endured an abusive and unhappy marriage for the sake of her reputation, while secretly holding on to a lesbian identity. Neither of these arguments is accurate, however. Constance Swartz was neither heterosexual nor lesbian. She showed no sign of losing her attraction towards women upon marriage, nor is there any evidence that she found Barney or men generally unattractive; rather, she was attracted to both sexes throughout her life (although after her marriage the form in which she expressed that attraction differed somewhat from the form in which she had expressed it before marriage). Constance was bisexual not through indecision and lack of courage, not by default, and not because of psychological illness. As she was to say later in life, "There's nothing as delectable as a new lover."⁵⁸ For Constance Grey Swartz, that lover might be either male or female.

⁵⁸ A.B. to Richard Mackie, interview, April 1989.