‘The light,’ she added, gathering her things about her, ‘only falls here and there’.

– ‘The Searchlight’

What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking.

– A Room of One’s Own

In the 1970s and 1980s feminist scholars initiated what is now a well-developed scholarship on Woolf’s critiques of male sexuality as a weapon for women’s oppression and of heterosexuality as female colonization. Ellen Hawkes recognized Woolf’s writing as immersed in sexuality, and Blanche Cook and Jane Marcus adopted the terms ‘Sapphic’ and ‘lesbian’ in reference to Woolf with an ease that disappeared under the influence of queer theories in the late 1980s to the present.

Many feminist scholars continue to read Woolf as radical in every way except sexually. Naomi Black defines Woolf’s feminism as ‘deeply radical’ and ‘transformational’ but regrets that her novels lack ‘female embodiment’. Critics mistakenly avoid the term ‘lesbian’ in reference to Woolf by over-relying on early sexologists’ myth of ‘the lesbian’ as an isolable identity and concomitant queer critiques of the term ‘lesbian’ as a restrictive label. Not one of Woolf’s biographers has outgrown the ‘prude’ stereotype. Although Woolf’s lesbian codes have become accessible since the publication of Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings in 1997, lesbian readings are rarely integrated into publications not specifically focused on Woolf and Vita.

The predominance of queer theory over sexual studies of Woolf has significantly exacerbated this impasse. Some scholars have applied the queer framework to Woolf’s fiction and produced original readings of Woolf’s lesbian themes, most notably Karyn Z. Sproles on Virginia and Vita and Kathryn Simpson on gift-giving as signifier for female homoerotic
possibilities. Yet even in this exceptional work Woolf’s originality as a lesbian theorist, as formulated on her own terms and in the context of her times, is buried under anachronistic impositions. Thus, Sproles ‘finds’ Woolf’s concept of desire synonymous with Lacan’s, and Simpson ‘recognizes’ a ‘queering’ Woolf challenging ‘regimes of the normal’ just as queer theorists do today.4

In this essay, I foreground implicit criteria that underlie prevalent proclamations about Woolf and sexuality. I especially target popular terms like ‘flexibility’, ‘fluidity’, and ‘amorphous’, derived from queer theory, to remind Woolf scholars that even such seemingly open-ended terminologies come with theoretical frameworks that may predetermine what we can or cannot see, or even feel. Queer proclamations about Woolf’s lesbian ideology are often premature because scholarship on Woolf and sexuality, based in historical context, is still underdeveloped. In the final section, by juxtaposing Woolf’s lesbian themes with Pater’s aestheticism, homoerotic Hellenism, and Lytton Strachey’s homosexual adaptations of the philosophy of G. E. Moore, I illustrate how inductive, contextual critical approaches challenge queer readings.

Experiences and meanings attached to male and female same-sex love are far too varied for a single theory to encompass, especially a theory, like queer, that is based on controversial, quantifiable founding presuppositions. Among tenets generally acclaimed by queer theorists, whether constructionist, interactionist or labelling, Lacanian, or discursive,4 two have especially muddled readers’ access to Woolf’s lesbian themes and sexual radicalism. One is queer theorists’ singular emphasis on dominant cultural authorities as the source of homosexual definitions, and the other is what Heather Love calls queer theory’s ‘corrosive relations with fixed identity categories.’6

Most influential is Michel Foucault’s familiar claim that sexologists and legal authorities invented the ‘modern homosexual’ in the mid-nineteenth century. Within this theoretical framework, social regulators are primary creators and shapers of homosexual identities, and homoerotically inclined people are secondary respondents, limited to ‘reverse discourses’: ‘the social … defines [and] … constructs the deviance’ (Weeks).7 Thus, scholars influenced by these ideas merge terms like ‘lesbian’ and ‘homosexual’ with social regulators’ invention of ‘the homosexual’ as ‘idea’, ‘construction’, ‘category’, ‘role’, ‘social script’, or ‘species’.8 This symbiotic partnership between ‘the oppressive definition and the defensive identities’ (Weeks) seems to underlie queer’s pervasive distrust of identity categories, whether defined by dominant culture authorities or by targeted
minorities. Thus, again and again, queer writers extol ‘instability’ (Butler), ‘fluidity and disruption’ (McRuer) and ‘indeterminacy’ and ‘incoherences’ (Jacose) as ideals of subjectivity and sexuality.9

Queer distrust of identity labels of any kind has filtered into Woolf studies as justifications for avoiding the term ‘lesbian’ in relation to Woolf. Common, widespread arguments include the following: ‘lesbian’ is a contemporary concept linked to identity concepts alien to Woolf (Rosenman; Kaivola; Sproles); Woolf could not identify with the only labels available to her, those devised by Freud, sexologists, and popular stereotypes and therefore could not conceive herself as lesbian (Rosenman; Kaivola) and most importantly, since Woolf was hostile to labels and did not call herself lesbian or Sapphist, neither should we (Kaivola; Lee).10

These propositions are consistent with fundamental queer tenets: that the term ‘lesbian’ irreversibly connotes an identity label; that in Woolf’s lifetime dominant culture authorities ‘established the limits’ (Weeks)11 within which homoerotically inclined women and men could self-define; and that homosexuality cannot exist unless the culture has a name for it. Thus, scholars’ avoidance of the term ‘lesbian’ makes sense within the context of queer theory. But it is important to remember that queer tenets are based on theory, not ‘truth’, and few of them can withstand challenges based on primary-source research.12

For example, Laura Doan’s study of reactions to the trial for The Well of Loneliness suggests that sexologist labels for homosexuals, though influential, were not the only labels available. Doan found a range of terms for female same-sex love, among them ‘Sapphist’, ‘female sexual invert’, ‘masculine woman’, ‘homogenic’, ‘intermediate sex’, ‘homosexual’, and ‘lesbian’. Both Virginia and Leonard Woolf preferred the words ‘Sapphist’ or ‘lesbian’ over sexologist terminology such as ‘invert’ (D2 235; L4 14).13 In Woolf’s lifetime, terminology and concepts for female same-sex love, including the term ‘lesbian’, were in the process of being formed within subcultures like Bloomsbury as well as by medical and legal authorities.

Scholars wary of reading Woolf as lesbian also frequently point to two examples of Woolf referring to Vita, but not herself, as Sapphist or lesbian (D3 51; L4 14). Because Woolf protected her privacy (L3 332), cared not to hurt Leonard, and justifiably feared public exposure, we cannot expect to find such overt self-definition in the diaries or letters. Besides, ‘coming out’ with a public declaration of gay identity is a recent gay and lesbian tradition, so it is anachronistic to impose such criteria on Woolf or others of her generation.14
As Gay Wachman argues, ‘lesbian’ can be used as a wide-ranging term for women like Woolf, whose erotic and emotional lives centre on women. ‘Lesbian’ in itself says nothing about ‘a place in which the self [is] found’ (Raitt); or about ‘inborn inclination’ (Lamos); it is certainly not a ‘simplistic categorization’ (Fuss; see also Lee) nor a ‘stable conclusion’ (Sproles), and it does not necessarily ‘promote an understanding of identity as something intrinsic and immutable’ (Kaivola). ‘Lesbian’ names same-sex erotic emotion. It need not say anything about identity at all. In Woolf’s writing, we find not an embrace of a pre-existing lesbian identity but a lesbian exploration of the emotional, political, and aesthetic possibilities of female same-sex love. The term ‘lesbian’ is historically specific yet flexible enough to promote, not delimit, sexual studies among Woolf scholars.

Queer values pervade not only discussions of lesbian terminology but assertions regarding Woolf’s sexual ideology as well. Scholars who reject the term ‘lesbian’ as anachronistic or too narrow nevertheless describe Woolf’s sexual ideals in terms of the ‘fluidity’ and ‘indeterminancy’ treasured by contemporary queers. Thus Sproles rejects the lesbian label to protect ‘Woolf’s own fluid notion of sexuality and subjectivity’ and ‘preserve [its] instability’. Simpson finds Woolf’s writing ‘privileges ambiguity, indeterminacy, and inconclusiveness’ (emphasis added). Queer ideas so dominate sexual studies of Woolf that scholars, not otherwise immersed in queer polemics, now repeat queer postulates as if they were established truth. Hermione Lee does so when she defends Woolf’s ‘ambiguous’ treatment of female friendships and Woolf’s ‘preference for sexual amorphousness’, ‘complexity’ and ‘fluidity’ against ‘simplified’ lesbian readings (emphasis added).

But this preoccupation with the erotics of ‘fluidity’, ‘instability’, and ‘undoing categories’ is a product of late-twentieth-century queer sexual politics, not of Woolf’s time. Like those of any philosophical movement, especially movements tied to political debates, queer origins shape their conclusions and strengths as well as limit their point of view. Even critics indifferent to contemporary gay sexual politics might consider the agendas attached to queer’s seemingly open-ended sexual terminology before imposing queer sexual criteria onto Woolf. And critics still convinced that queers are ‘the lesbian and gay avant-garde’ (Hennesy) might nevertheless consider that the crucibles of sexual ecstasy for Woolf and others of her generation might be different from, but not therefore less radical than, their own.

This is not to deny Woolf’s mistrust of labels or her commitment to sexual freedom and adventure. But the current vagueness of queer sexual
terminology – the much reiterated ‘amorphous’, ‘fluidity’, and ‘complex’ – invites questions about queer theory’s ability to discern Woolf’s distinct sexual ideals.

Scholars who keep the critical searchlight on Woolf’s relationship to dominant culture sexual categories, however ‘ambivalent’ or ‘disruptive’ they imagine that relationship to be, risk missing Woolf’s originality as an author of lesbian erotic fiction and sexual theorist. Queer theorists leave little room for sexual minorities to act on their own behalf, and they conceive the relationship between dominator and dominated as interdependent, ‘march[ing] together’ through history. Can readings derived from the core queer tenet that culture authorities ‘established the limits’ for lesbian self-fashioning, account for a figure as original and alienated as Woolf, who, in A Room of One’s Own, declaimed against male authorities: ‘there is . . . no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind’ (ROO 79) and who ‘own[ed] no authority’ and was proud of her ‘detachment from the hierarchy, the patriarchy’ (D5 171; 347)?

Queer strategies of resistance for sexual minorities posit subjective involvement with dominant culture categories: ‘queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal’ (Jacose). However, in Three Guineas, Woolf recommends women practice a politics of ‘indifference’ to dominant culture norms: to take the ‘limelight’ of engaged resistance off dictators (TG 109, 114). More precise sexual readings would account for the distinctions between Woolf’s strategy of disengagement and Queer’s policy of ‘disruptive repetition’ (Butler). If we look at just The Years, Woolf’s novel about the ‘sexual lives of women’ (D4 6), we find that this detachment from authorities is also prerequisite for women’s access to ‘a queer kind of foolish exaltation’ (Draft Y7 101; see also Y 382). Eleanor’s expansive ‘pleasure’ and Sara’s ‘rapture’ coincide with their turning their backs on the Law Courts. The prelude to Kitty’s lesbian erotic hilltop epiphany calls up anti-authoritarian impulses: she felt ‘as if she were a little girl who had run away from her nurse and escaped’, and exacts ‘amputation . . . cut off from that circle of light’ – that is, London (Y 270).

What adjustments could be made, what other critical standpoints could be taken, so that Woolf’s lesbian themes can be read in the context of her politics of detachment and indifference, apparent not only in Three Guineas but as starting point for lesbian epiphanies in the fiction? Why reinvent, as Simpson does, Woolf’s ‘concept of the gift economy’ as a queer-like ‘disruptive and resistant’ engagement with capitalist economies, when Woolf herself juxtaposes generosity with prerequisite
disengagement from social hierarchies? Woolf writes, ‘it’s better to give than to take! better to remain outside the patriarchy’ (Draft Y7 6). Can Woolf scholars reading through the lens of a theoretical tradition that has rejected a ‘simple inside/outside dialectic’ (Fuss)\(^{14}\) integrate Woolf’s reiterated sense of herself as ‘fundamentally an outsider’ (D5 189) without retroactively adding ‘uncertainty’ or ‘disruptive’ to Woolf’s chosen standpoint?

Woolf also seems to have more faith than do queer theorists in the saving power of the intellect, imagination, and emotions, especially for outsiders like herself (TG 114). Queer advice to sexual minorities advocates a ‘dismantl[ing]’ (Lamos), ‘disclaiming’ (Butler, emphasis in original), and ‘disorganization’ (Fuss)\(^{25}\) of naming attempts on both sides of the dominator and dominated divide. In contrast, Woolf urges outsiders to ‘begin inwardly’ (Y 410), ‘to form’ – ‘to make’ (Y 296, 315), so that ‘forming new wholes, – there will be born a language, which will be music, poetry, & painting’ (Draft Y5 114). Can Woolf scholars immersed in theories committed to ‘working on the insides of our inherited sexual vocabularies’ (Fuss)\(^{26}\) account for homoerotic vocabularies in writers of previous generations who, like Woolf, constructed new languages adequate for their tabooed emotions and desires?

Lacking a language or lesbian literary tradition on which to rely, Woolf fashioned the words for female same-sex love by interrogating her feelings for Vita. Recalling Vita’s recent visit, Woolf asks, ‘How I felt – now what was it like!’, and she responds in metaphors – ‘a little ball kept bubbling up and down on the spray of a fountain’ – that appear as lesbian signets in the fiction (Y 369).\(^{27}\) Woolf takes feelings, especially feelings outside the grid of the normal, as a starting point for lesbian fashioning in life and fiction. In The Years, Eleanor speaks of ‘feelings that come when one’s asleep’ (Y 384). In the draft, Eleanor’s unchartered emotions are overtly lesbian. After Kitty’s kiss, Eleanor, feeling ‘queer’, ‘excited, – stimulated’, asks ‘What do I feel? How could I describe it?’ (Draft Y6 7–8).

Woolf’s lesbian emotions are subject to reason and a highly cultivated creative imagination. But can a generation of critics, trained in queer sexual categories, read Woolf’s call for ‘voluntary’ ‘pleasure[s]’, sprung from ‘the spontaneous heart of life’ (Draft Y7 6), without labeling her ‘essentialist’, a naïve proponent of the ‘hydraulic’ model of sexual release, as Weeks labels feminists who, like Woolf, consider female sexual liberation key to women’s freedom from the ‘sexual colonization of women by men’?\(^{28}\)

Woolf’s emphasis on feelings as conditional to sexual liberation rather than sexual acts is generational as well as personal.\(^{29}\) For example, Lytton
Strachey defends a sexual ethics based on ‘feelings … not upon acts’; he defines his revolutionary task as ‘freer of the emotions’. Woolf and Strachey were sexual idealists in disparate but comparable ways. Both imagined erotic love in concert, not conflict, with the body. Strachey adds that one cannot ‘reach the greatest heights of affection unless one has resort to these physical methods of expressing it’, and he affirms copulation as ‘the climax and crown of love’. Woolf’s lesbian epiphanies are metaphoric and transformational, but recognisably embodied in the vulva (Clarissa’s ‘match burning in a crocus’ [Mrs D 32]) and female sexual arousal and orgasm (Rhoda’s ‘tight-folded, flooding free’ [W 57]). What other writer of her generation (or since) has so beautifully eroticized the female body as such a rich resource for ecstasy, transcendence, and illumination?

At its origins, queer theory instituted ‘sexuality as erotic pleasure and play’ (Hennessy), a ‘choice of acts’ in place of the ‘relationship between sex and love’ (Weeks). But Woolf and her homosexual male friends, for example, E. M. Forster, Goldie Lowes Dickinson, and Lytton Strachey, conceived sexual liberation as embodied emotional transformation, consonant with their highest ideals. Strachey exults in the ‘exquisite … supernal feelings’ of loving Duncan; he merges ‘the absolute [with] the adored’. Woolf’s sexual idealism is not exactly like Strachey’s or others’ in her circle, but Strachey certainly provided one of the contexts in which Woolf could think about homosexuality, albeit on her own terms.

But can Woolf scholars cultivate the empathy and historical imagination to conceptualize Strachey’s sexual idealism (and Woolf’s?) without calling up the ‘knee jerk’ imprint that body hatred necessarily motivates the dream of a ‘higher Love’ as Julie Anne Taddeo does when she claims Strachey’s ‘pursuit of a spiritual, higher Love’ is motivated by his ‘linking sex with disease and death’? Strachey writes of loving Duncan in terms of ‘our feelings as a whole’: ‘He has satisfied my body, and my mind, and my heart’. But Taddeo sees only binary conflict between spiritual and physical love. Taddeo’s scathing, book-length caricature of Strachey’s sexual life and theories epitomizes the dangers of deductive theoretical approaches when taken to extremes. Taddeo makes explicit the homophobic stereotype shaping her interpretations: ‘I see his life as an unconscious caricature of the bourgeois Victorian woman’ (5). She identifies Stephen Greenblatt’s constructionist claim that individuals are entirely shaped by social institutions as the foundation of her study. Since Greenblatt claims self-creation is impossible, no wonder Taddeo ‘finds’ Strachey’s attempts to model new sexual identities an utter failure.
However, Taddeo is correct that Strachey was ‘often reluctant to cross the line from spiritual to physical love’. But Strachey’s curtailed sexual experiences were due to historical circumstances, not to body shame. In 1904, Strachey confides to John Maynard Keynes, ‘I am in holy terror of a visit from the police’, and such worries about detection are common in their letters. Strachey once wrote to Keynes that he resisted a ‘temptation of the corner … partly the result of [Keynes’] admonishments’.

I contrast Bloomsbury and queer sexual ideals to remind critics to acknowledge and explore the differences – not to establish a contest between them. Opposition to absorbing variant homosexual erotic styles back into a priori categories, especially binaries as clichéd as sexualities based on ‘feeling’ (Bloomsbury) versus ‘body’ (queer), is exactly what this essay is about. Despite differences in sexual strategies, a queer-centred, cross-generational dialogue with Woolf’s erotic epistemology could generate innovative discussions about, for example, what constitutes sexual liberation. As long as queer theorists remember not to mistake Woolf’s lesbian values for their own, as Colleen Lamos does when she claims Woolf shared a core queer tenet, that same-sex love is ‘not a sign of inborn inclination’. Yet the only time Woolf directly addresses this issue, she leaves the option open.

The most egregious of sexual categories, pervasive in conceptions about Woolf and sexuality, remains the ‘virgin-whore’ dichotomy that places Woolf on the virgin side. Claims that she was ‘sexually squeamish’, a ‘eunuch’, her sexuality ‘barely expressed’ abound in the critical canon. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman claims Woolf’s ‘deeply ingrained sense of herself as asexual’ prevented her from ‘adopting a lesbian identity’. Even critics who now affirm Woolf’s sexual love for Vita qualify such acknowledgements with some reference to Woolf’s supposed sexual inadequacies. Mitchell Leaska reduces Woolf’s passionate love for Vita to a longing for ‘maternal coddling’. Similarly, Sproles describes Woolf’s lesbian desires as sexual, but (the requisite qualifier) childlike. Like Sproles, Lee juxtaposes an affirmative reading of Woolf’s sexuality – ‘her sensuality and her will as much in play as Vita’s’ – with ‘She may have been “queer in some ways”, but was not “altogether so queer” enough for Vita’. But, by what criteria has Lee judged Woolf’s queer credentials inferior?

Passages from Woolf’s love letters to Vita are often quoted, and I need not repeat many here. But I do think Woolf scholars need to ask why feminist and even queer theorists continue to anaesthetize the intense sexual passion Woolf records for Violet Dickinson (those ‘hot volcano depths’ [L 185]) and Vita (‘every nerve running fire’ [L 306]) as Lamos does when
she reduces Woolf’s ‘Sapphic love’ to ‘feminine fondness for women’. Queer apologists praise the ‘charms’ of ‘indeterminacy’ (Jacose), ‘the pleasure produced by the instability of those categories’ (Butler, emphasis in original). What is lost in queer’s preoccupation with the erotics of unstable categories and in Woolf studies generally – but not in Woolf’s fiction – is what the word ‘lesbian’ maintains: the lesbian body, female-centred, desired, and desiring. Despite its thorough explication of Woolf’s female same-sex themes, Simpson insists her book will not claim that ‘a specific lesbian or even Sapphic identity emerges’ for Woolf. Such reassurances may seem liberating inside the logic of queer polemics, but in the context of the history of disembodied caricatures of Woolf’s sexuality, a queer Woolf may offer little more for future sexual studies than Michael Holroyd’s 1971 epitaph of Woolf’s sexuality as an ‘ascetic, sexless’ ‘vacuum’.40

Lesbian readings of Woolf’s fiction in homoerotic historical contexts can fundamentally alter common assertions about Woolf and sexuality. For example, if we juxtapose Woolf and Pater’s fiction, we find that the ‘ambiguity’ and ‘uncertainty’ Lee, Sproles, and so many others perceive among Woolf’s proto-lesbian figures might be the product of history, rather than an expression, as they claim, of Woolf’s sexual ideals. Love suggests that Pater’s proto-gay figures, among them Marius the Epicurean, Denys Lauxerrois, Sebastian van Storck, and Gaston de LaTour, exhibit an ‘heroics of . . . forced exile’, ‘of refusal, even of failure’ necessitated by the ‘experience of shame and secrecy’ endured by homosexuals under intolerant regimes. Love’s description of Pater’s passive resistors of heterosexual norms might aptly describe Woolf’s proto-lesbian and male homosexual figures as well: their ‘shrinking resistance’ (Rachel and Lily); ‘politics of refusal’ (Eleanor, Rose and Peggy), and of ‘camouflage’ (Clarissa, Kitty, and Edward) and ‘disappearance’ (Rhoda and Septimus), are recognizable in this context as homosexual strategies of survival in profoundly homophobic times.41 Like Pater, Woolf presents historical portraits of same-sex lovers of her generation: not the ‘fluidity’ of desire, but the fracturing of closeted same-sex desire into more socially acceptable activities and relationships. Consider Lily’s painting, Eleanor’s volunteer work, Clarissa’s memories of Sally, Edward’s students, Septimus’s war buddy, and Kitty’s hilltop lesbian transmogrification of nature.

Pater praises a sensuality intensii ed ‘by the absence of the beloved . . . the love . . . for the chevalier who never comes’.42 The themes of unrequited same-sex love and longing for the absent beloved pervade Woolf’s lesbian plots as well. Recall Clarissa’s lifelong regrets about losing Sally; Lily’s anguished lament for Mrs Ramsay, ‘to want and want and not to have’
Kitty’s book-length pursuit of her beloved, Eleanor: to come to her party, to visit, to take a ride in her car (Y 262, 180, 433). Thus, read in homoerotic historical context, Rhoda’s lament, ‘To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body’ (W 57), can be read as autobiographical and generational. Septimus’s anguished cry for ‘Evans, Evans, Evans’ (MD 147) shortly before he commits suicide parallels Pater’s Marius’ ‘turn to think once more of the beloved’ as he (Rachel-like) sinks towards premature death. The commonalities in Pater’s and Woolf’s proto-gay characters remind us that among same-sex lovers of their generations, friendship was not always just about ‘fondness’, but rather the primary site of exquisite sexual longing and love.

Thus, in his conclusion to The Renaissance, Pater places the ‘face of one’s friend’ as a primary inspirer of that ‘exquisite passion … knowledge … lifted horizon … [and] stirring of the senses’ that makes art possible and life worth living. In homoerotic aestheticism, self-scrutiny, in collaboration with the ideal beloved, determines self-definition and writing practices. Feelings, especially feelings of pleasure, replace Victorian emphasis on reason and morality as epistemological authorities. In this context, Woolf’s self-scrutiny can be recognised as a lesbian strategy of self-preservation and definition. Woolf’s focus on sexual emotion rather than acts appears motivated by a radical rejection of dominant culture sexual moralities, not ‘by Puritanism … [or] an ancestral revulsion from sensuality’, as Black claims.

Plato’s influence on the homoerotic imaginations of male authors like Pater is well documented, but Woolf’s homoerotic interest in Plato’s writings, especially the Symposium and Phaedrus, remains unexplored despite scholarly consensus that Plato’s writings were important to Woolf. Yet there is abundant textual evidence that Woolf, like her male peers, transmuted a Socratic erotic model to amalgamate lesbian emotions with her highest ideals. As in the Symposium, in Woolf’s fiction, same-sex love is ‘inimical to tyranny’ (Miss Fripp’s kiss inspires Kitty to escape Oxford forever [Y 61]) and an inspirer of ‘courage’ (Rhoda’s self-exile from ‘the submerged mind of empire’ at the end of the bed [W 206]), ‘wisdom’ (struck, Phaedrus-like, by the sight of Kitty’s beautiful daughter-in-law, Eleanor condemns the sexual double standard and homophobia) and ‘virtue’ (inspired by memories of Sally’s kiss, Clarissa momentarily transcends class arrogance by siding with Septimus against Dr Bradshaw).

Clarissa’s love for Sally, Lily’s for Mrs Ramsay, and Rhoda’s for Alice are like the ‘inspiring frenzy’ of the lover praised by Socrates in Phaedrus as
‘the greatest of heaven’s blessings’. In this dialogue, Socrates differentiates the temperate fondness of the non-lover for his friend from the ‘frenzy’ of the ‘inspired friend’ – and, in reading friendship in Woolf’s fiction, so should we.48

Reading Woolf in this homoerotic Hellenic context, we can better discern the role of lesbian passion and the lesbian beloved in Woolf’s fiction, easily missed if we read through our own time’s desexualized demarcation of friendship from sexual love. In this way, we can also answer Lee’s refusal to define Woolf as ‘a Sapphist’ writer because ‘unlike [in] Vita’s (or Radclyffe Hall’s) [writings], there are no romances between Byronic heroes and languid girls, no sadomasochistic erotic scenes, no gloomy doomed transvestites’.49 Lee’s externally imposed criteria for Sapphism is constructionist theory at its most bizarre. Why would Woolf, renowned for her unconventional plots and character presentations atypically revert to such stereotypical narrative conventions, just because the topic is sexuality? Woolf wrote lesbian themes with the same subtlety, indirection, and innovation characteristic of her style generally.

Beginning with Mrs Dalloway, Woolf’s beloved, Vita, pervades the fiction not as overt object of desire in a romantic love plot, but as inspirer of that ‘love madness’, praised in Phaedrus, that alone can exalt to a ‘divine release from the ordinary ways of men’.50 Woolf transforms memory fragments from moments with Vita into every epiphany, among them nightingales (L4 29, 314), white pearls (L3 342; L5 157), porpoises (L3 462), and pigeons (L5 266). By permeating her fiction with these lesbian-love memories, together with vulva imagery, Woolf recreates a daily life in which lesbian sensibilities merge with that which she valued most in life (beauty, liberty, courage, knowledge, intimate moments with one’s beloved friend), ‘those things in which God [Eros] abides’.51 With further inquiry along these lines, scholars might discover Woolf’s detachment of lesbian desire from its normal imperatives more radical than Lee’s clichéd lesbian plots (or Butler’s ‘disruptive repetition’). Like Plato, Dante, and other authors of idealist love traditions, Woolf aims to reshape the collective (female) erotic imagination, not to retell or even reinvent lesbian-love plots about couples. I suggest we assess her sexual theories within the context of her aims rather than through the lens of contemporary theories that focus on sexual acts, rather than transformed emotions, as the criteria for sexual freedom.

Woolf’s relationship to Bloomsbury sexual theories, especially ideas about same-sex love, needs to be theorized anew from the perspective of lesbian studies.52 In 1932, Woolf wrote of Lytton Strachey: ‘sometimes I
think I never talked so much to anyone, except Leonard’ (L5 129). What might new studies of these two Bloomsbury icons, both self-elected shapers of modernist homosexualities, tell us about collaborative self-fashioning among homosexual subculture intellectual elites? G. E. Moore’s claim that ‘no moral law is self-evident’ likely affirmed Woolf’s early intimations that lesbian feelings were ‘good’, as it did for Keynes and Strachey (L3 86). As Tom Regan notes, Moore’s Principia Ethica reassured Bloomsbury youth that ‘there is no privileged class of “value experts” [more] qualified … in psychology or biology, for example, or theology and metaphysics … to judge what is good-in-itself than anyone else’. Woolf’s participation in early Bloomsbury discussions about Moore’s ethics provides yet another context in which the inwardness of her lesbian self-fashioning can be read as radical anti-authoritarianism, not fearful retreat from ‘female embodiment’.

Close parallels between Percival and Pater’s ideal beloved indicate Woolf’s engagement with male homoerotic traditions and her alienation from them. Percival, like Flavian, is ‘Prince of the school’, and like Denys L’auxerrois, favoured with the ‘regular beauty of a pagan god’. Pater’s Aucassin, ‘the Provencal love-god … riding on a white horse’, is prototype not only for Pater’s pagan, Greek-derived militarist love ideal, but also for other homosexual authors, such as John Addington Symonds and Goldie Lowes Dickinson. When Woolf depicts Percival’s unheroic fall from a horse, she mocks not only the war culture that celebrates this hero ideal, but a male homosexual subculture still erotically entangled with militaristic masculinity. As Annabel Farraday warns, lesbian lives cannot be reduced to male homosexual models and need to be studied in relation to women’s oppressed social status. Reading Woolf in male homosexual contexts is an adjunct, not a replacement, for female-centred studies.

In this essay, I have engaged selectively with influential Woolf scholars where their assertions about Woolf and sexuality are consonant with assumptions widely repeated at conferences, in online discussions, and in scholarship. Scholars most frequently challenged on these terms are also scholars whose work provides important contributions for Woolf and sexual theories. The importance of queer readings by Karyn Sproles and Kathryn Simpson has already been mentioned. Hermione Lee’s biography is deservedly the most acclaimed: Lee’s presentation of Woolf as among the most ‘professional, perfectionist, energetic, courageous and committed writers in the language’ can now be extended to Woolf’s sexual themes.

Scholars still insecure about using the word ‘lesbian’ can rely on Naomi Black’s Virginia Woolf as Feminist as a model for the kind of historical
grounding also required for lesbian studies. After all, Woolf outright rejected the word ‘feminist’ in *Three Guineas* (137), but has that kept anyone in the Woolf community from using ‘the word’ when speaking about Woolf? Lesbian studies can distinguish, as Black does for ‘feminist’, meanings Woolf created for lesbian emotions from those accrued by sexologists, legal authorities, queer theorists or anyone else.

In conclusion, I argue for critical approaches to sexual readings developed inductively from close readings of Woolf’s writings and grounded in her, not her critics’, autobiographical, literary, and historical contexts. Love sees a recent shift in queer studies from discursive practices to approaches that ‘turn to affect and experience’. While such an expansion is welcome, Love’s chronology leaves queer’s fundamental assumptions and deductive approach to literature intact: whether one begins by looking for queer’s cherished ‘indeterminacy’ or for ‘emotion, temporality, intimacy, embodiment’,57 one risks ‘discovering’ only what one set out to find. Woolf studies also needs scholars less encumbered by *a priori* approaches, more willing to theorize Woolf and sexuality ‘as [she] saw it’ – even when Woolf’s sexual politics are different from or anathema to their own.

NOTES


Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society, p. 117.

27 See also D2 313; D3 287.
29 Suzanne Raitt notes that homosexual women and men in Havelock Ellis’ studies spoke of homoeroticism in terms of love far more often than as sexual acts. Raitt, ‘Sex, Love and the Homosexual Body in Early Sexology’ in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds., Sexology in Culture: Labelling, Bodies, and Desires (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp. 150–63, 158. See also Alan Bray, The Friend (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 6 on how contemporary theorists’ inability to conceive of erotic love except in terms of sexual acts obscures their ability to discern homoeroticism in prior centuries.
33 Letter, Strachey to Duncan Grant [LSDG 19 (2)], dated 10 January 1906, British Library MSS ADD 57932; quoted by permission of The Society of Authors, agents of The Strachey Trust. In the holograph draft for The Years, Eleanor’s sexual ethics are similar to Strachey’s, both drawn from G. E. Moore’s concept of ‘states of mind’. In ‘Art and Indecency’, Strachey writes that sexual ethics rely on ‘a state of mind . . . not a state of body’ (in The Really Interesting Question, p. 88).
Letter, Strachey to Duncan Grant, dated 21 December 1905 in Letters, p. 88;


46 Grace Radin, “‘Two Enormous Chunks’: Episodes Excluded during the Final Revisions of The Years’, Bulletin of the New York Public Library, 80 (1977), 221–51.


48 On Alice as Rhoda’s beloved in the holograph draft, see Annette Oxindine, ‘Rhoda Submerged: Lesbian Suicide in The Years’ in Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings, pp. 203–21, 214–15; Plato, Phaedrus, in Plato on Homosexuality, pp. 43–102, 63, 73.

49 Lee, Virginia Woolf, p. 45.

50 Plato, Phaedrus, in Plato on Homosexuality, p. 85.


54 Lee, Virginia Woolf, p. 4.