To understand gay and lesbian culture in the 1950s, we must start by acknowledging that American society in that decade imposed a global policy of repression on homosexuality. As historians have shown, the 1950s departed from earlier eras in making homosexuality not only a widely debated social ill but also an official object of government censure. In “New York City Gay Liberation and the Queer Commuters,” Henry Abelove makes the provocative case that a set of writers (Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Elizabeth Bishop, James Baldwin, and Paul and Jane Bowles) who had a crucial influence on 1960s Gay Liberation “were driven out of the United States during the post–World War II era,” when “nothing like a reasonably secure life in sex or work was at all possible.”1 In The Straight State, Margot Canaday argues that “from the mid-1940s into the late 1960s... the state crafted tools to overtly target homosexuality.”2 In The Lavender Scare, David K. Johnson details how the titular inquisition, akin to the more famous Red Scare of McCarthyism, served the explicit goal of remasculinizing a softened, post–New Deal federal government by ferreting homosexuals out of the Civil Service – as well as inadvertently demonstrating how many homosexuals actually worked there in the first place. That gay men and lesbians were likened to those secret agents whom FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover (speaking of Communists) dubbed “masters of deceit” is hardly surprising. Forced into hiding, their very existence a scandal, gay men and lesbians in any grouping of two or more – from the couple to the social club to the era’s tentative civil rights organizations – threatened a conspiracy.

“I hear they are purging the State Department of queers,” Lee tells his lover in William S. Burroughs’s Queer (1953). “If they do, they will be operating with a skeleton staff.”3 Burroughs is referring to the fact that Eisenhower’s first term saw the escalation of an “aggressive security stance toward homosexuality,” as Johnson puts it.4 The State Department’s “no-tolerance policy” answered to the anxious second-guessing that dominated
the decade as a whole, a period when innuendo and hearsay were raised to
the level of proof (129). “State Department staffers became suspect because
someone had ‘just a funny feeling about him,’” Michael Sherry notes, “or
because of ‘her mannish voice, her odd-shaped lips.’”5 In Cold War cul-
ture, which elevated the paranoid style to a national mandate, “Homosexu-
ality was a volatile rather than absolute category, suspect less in itself
than as a tracer to a dense web of finely spun connections” (70). It is not
hard to see why such volatility prevailed where gay men and women were
concerned. Repeatedly in the 1950s, the argument that homosexuals were
comprehensible due to their obviousness was trumped by the claim that
such figures were beyond discovery by virtue of the finesse with which they
could act any role.

Thus in his 1961 best seller, The Sixth Man, the journalist (and former
Newsweek editor) Jess Stearn finds alongside the “obvious deviates,” “who
glory in flaunting their homosexuality in society’s face,” a critical mass of
“[male] homosexuals who neither swished, swayed, nor sashayed.”6 The
“ostensibly masculine” gay man, Stearn concludes, is a “male impersonator”
who “puts on an effective act for an audience of unsuspecting millions” (23,
93). Far from unique to homophobic discourse, such conflicting reports of
the queen’s accessibility to perception – he is both bad at concealment and
superb at nondescriptness – also form a staple of mid-century America’s
most prominent homophile fiction. “We constantly pass into and out of
stages as we develop,” Tim tells Philip in Quatrefoil, James Barr’s 1950 novel
of naval officers in love. “Few people even recognize them. Fewer mas-
ter them.”7 Tim’s courtship of Philip includes schooling him in such role
mastery – in particular, in concealing “the first hint of effeminacy” (325).

In Gore Vidal’s The City and the Pillar (1948), Jim Willard finds him-
self in “many different homosexual worlds,” but these really reduce to two
types.8 On one hand are the “queens” by whom he is “repelled” because
they insist on flaunting their difference, their “desire to move in splendor
through the lives of others,” and on the other are the “masculine, rather
tense men” who “appealed to Jim” and who, like Jim himself, move through
life “as unnoticed by the enemy as they were known to one another” (156,
55). Aware early on of being “a little bit different from the others,” certain
gay men manage to transform this self-consciousness into a state of catlike
readiness that equips them with a powerful means of self-preservation. A
studious self-criticism, meant to edit out “noticeably effeminate” features
or habits, keeps some queers from becoming “known” and allows them to
seem “pretty ordinary” (80).
Announcing that many gay men were essentially passing in their midst, books like *Quatrefoil* and *The City and the Pillar* confirmed the worst fears of Cold Warriors that there really was a “homintern,” a secret, worldwide queer community with a “stranglehold” on American art and culture (Lavender 35). But even more notable was the novels’ ethnographic style – the template for gay and lesbian fiction in the decades to come. Queer authorship in the 1950s appears modeled overwhelmingly on the participant-observer techniques of academic anthropology, with homosexuality understood among writers and other artists – just as for their counterparts in psychiatry and the FBI – as a discrete if not precisely intelligible object of knowledge. Yet the embrace of an anthropological hermeneutic by gay men and lesbians was also motivated by the fact that, unlike medicine, social science at mid-century was relatively nonjudgmental when it came to homosexuality. If the dry title of his best-selling *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) nodded toward his background in the life-sciences, Alfred Kinsey’s study marked its author’s wholehearted repatriation to social-scientific method. And keenly attuned to dramaturgical models of self-presentation, the sociologist Erving Goffman would construe the obligatory role-playing in queer life as less marginal than central to a social order in which “the arts of impression management” were universal currencies.

Whatever its provenance, the ethnographic standpoint allowed the unprecedented documentary frankness of gay and lesbian fiction in the 1950s to coincide with a certain detachment from the subject matter of homosexuality, as though queer authors wished to avoid handling their own hazardous materials. In the spirit of the age’s deference to the hermeneutics of suspicion, 1950s queer fiction partook of the period’s impulse to see nonnormative sexuality as symptomatic of broader structural perversities. Hence James Baldwin writes *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) as a study of the intersection of white supremacy, colonialism, and the repressed desire for the Other – Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) rewritten as a melodrama of the closet. “I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane,” Baldwin’s David tells us, literalizing the reflexivity – the attention to oneself as if to a third-personal object – that Vidal’s novel foregrounds. “My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent.” Burroughs meanwhile routinely enacted a virtually social-scientific impassiveness through his trademark deadpan. In reference to the circuit of gay men “bumping into each other in queer joints from New York to Cairo,” Burroughs’s narrator in *Junky* tells us: “I saw a
way of life, a vocabulary, references, a whole symbol system, as the sociologists say."\textsuperscript{11}

It may seem a stretch to argue that the era’s most popular lesbian pulp novels gestured toward such dispassionate autocritique by virtue of their college (or really sorority) settings. Vin Packer’s \textit{Spring Fire} (1952) and Ann Bannon’s \textit{Odd Girl Out} (1957) were less interested in the consciousness-raising that would preoccupy the campus in the restless 1960s, after all, than with the lusts of the flesh that their largely straight male (and working-class) readership expected. Yet their institutional locus hints at the reach of what we might call an \textit{academic} approach to homosexuality, given that the postwar college instituted a host of by turns alienating and absorptive reading pedagogies that seem tailor-made for the epistemology of the closet. On discovering her lesbianism, Packer’s Mitch muses that “It was like picking up a book and reading the things the main character did and... thinking vaguely, at first, \textit{Why, I’m that way a little... until the realization comes... that this is you, this character}.”\textsuperscript{12} And in Bannon’s \textit{Odd Girl Out}, the first in her Beebo Brinker series, college is not so much the place where queer characters discover their difference as the place where that difference can be abstracted and given shape – where “analyzing yourself” and “everybody you know,” as Beth’s boyfriend Charlie disparagingly puts it, is built into the curriculum.\textsuperscript{13} Apart from the fact that they make same-sex bonds readily available, colleges function in lesbian novels (as the military does in Vidal’s and Barr’s) to “normalize” the outsider status of queer characters, insofar as college (like the navy), a place of \textit{temporary} belonging at best, makes everyone an outsider – with even the most pedigreed membership understood to be probationary and, of course, set to expire. Though the novel understands Beth and Laura’s decision to “leave school” together for Greenwich Village before graduation as “freedom,” the college itself, in its virtually anomic indifference to highly regulated forms of socialization (like, say, kinship), already provides the stencil for the kind of liberated relations they seek (\textit{Odd} 185, 192).

Dramatizing their precarious inclusion in groups or organizations to which they didn’t necessarily want to belong, 1950s queer fiction compensated its metic characters with a privileged because disembedded gaze, an Archimedean point from which to cast their insightful vision on society as a whole. Such big-picture thinking forms an important theme in Patricia Highsmith’s \textit{The Price of Salt} (1952) – a book that was published as serious hardback fiction (under the pseudonym Clare Morgan) before it became a lesbian pulp blockbuster. Therese Belivet’s position as “an outsider,”
“flung out of space,” affords her the prerogative of maintaining a continual Platonic meditation on the nature of the good – from the challenges of aesthetic evaluation (like what makes a “good painter”) to the relation between material and spiritual satisfaction (as when Therese’s lover Carol Aird tells her that “Furniture does me good”). In the world imagined by *The Price of Salt* (as opposed to that imagined in Highsmith’s most famous novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* [1955]), there doesn’t seem to be one version of the good life. Therese herself defines the good life alternately as vacations in Rapallo, a husband and child, success as a set designer, and, finally, being with her same-sex lover. Wanting to work, she can imagine herself in situations beyond Tom Ripley’s narrowly considered dilettantism. (In *Ripley*, of course, you need a trust fund to have a good life.) It would be best to say that Therese doesn’t want a job so much as a *career*, almost as rare a feat for a woman in 1950s America as openly loving another woman. “Long before I knew about sex,” Beebo tells her gay male mentor in Bannon’s 1962 novel *Beebo Brinker*, as though confessing a secret as taboo as lesbian desire, “I knew I wanted to be tall and strong and wear pants . . . and have a career.”

We cannot overlook the fact that Therese’s career aspirations belong to a gay and lesbian cultural experience in which theatricality was understood as essential to thriving. The vocation Therese passionately pursues is a cliché of (at least male) homosexual identity; she is a set designer for the stage. And although she differs in many ways from the conspicuously consuming Tom Ripley, Therese shares with Tom the view that artifice is the surest means of evading “incrimination” (*Price* 205). As if in keeping with Abelove’s queer commuters, who “wanted jobs as well as sex” (Highsmith herself was frequently out of the US in the 1950s and moved permanently to Europe in the 1960s), *The Price of Salt* eroticizes productive labor, forging a tight link between Therese’s desire for a career and other women’s desire for her. Carol’s interest is really kindled when she finds out Therese has a job designing for an off-Broadway play. “My little big shot,” Carol tells Therese when the latter has broken through to Broadway. “Now you look like you might do something *good*” (250). Therese also engages in a flirtation with Genevieve Cranell, the star of another show she has just been hired to design sets for. It would seem that in Cold War lesbian New York, at least as Highsmith depicts it, “job” really is “the magic word” Therese claims it is, unlocking the doors to women’s hearts (16). In making intellectual labor sexy, Highsmith makes her heroine a distinctive figure in the postwar sex-gender system. Therese does not shop but works her way through the female *bildungsroman*.
Therese’s climb up the meritocratic ladder entails a different sort of distinction from what Tom Ripley covets, though it is important to note that neither Therese nor Tom is distinctive in the way that Cold War homophobic discourse would insist: their specialness does not consign them to a life of virtually suicidal solitude. Tom ends up rich and married; and *The Price of Salt* makes it clear that “it was Carol she loved and would always love... It would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses” (266). What is provocative about this passage is that it multiplies Carol into a kind of human photocopy, a figure both singular (to Therese) and infinitely reproducible. The sense of possibility that Therese associates with her profession and with her lover refashions the logic of the hysterical sublime advanced by the 1950s discourses of homosexuality at their grimmest. In the view of Robert Masters, channeling just about every 1950s expert on homosexuality, “loveless promiscuity” was the best gay men and lesbians could hope for – an indefinite chain of transient partners approaching Hegel’s bad infinity.¹⁷

Though 1950s gay and lesbian literary culture expressed a general desire to opt out of this numbers game in favor of pairing off, we also find an influential gay artist, the poet Frank O’Hara, wholly committed to playing it. O’Hara’s sense of aesthetic possibility was inseparable from his well-attested fondness for promiscuity. Hence O’Hara sought pleasure in collaboration; his partnerships with painters and other writers are almost too numerous to count. If he was the consummate collaborator, it was partly because he appeared to be the ultimate *collaborationist*. This idea at any rate was implicit in the opinion held by both art critics and Museum of Modern Art directors that his “inappropriate closeness” to artists, as Lytle Shaw puts it, made him liable to abundant conflicts of interest when he assumed an executive role at the museum.¹⁸ Such a take on O’Hara’s compromised position recalls the widely perceived complicity between the bureaucrat and the queer that the Lavender Scare made salient. Yet O’Hara seemed to embrace the charge of mixed motives with a vengeful glee, overacting his role as collaborator in both writing and life.

In 1961, for example, in the midst of an increasingly successful career in the International Department at MoMA, O’Hara composed a series of poems whose titles, which rang variations on the “FYI” that appeared in the headings of interoffice correspondence, explicitly presented themselves as though they were bureaucratic memos: “Lunch Hour FYI,” “FYI (Prix de Beauté).” This was the gesture of a poet for whom the vernacular of bureaucratic communication had become a cognate *techne* for poetry
itself. Such poems reveal how intensely O'Hara cathected the culture of bureaucracy, making it over from the site of white-collar drudgery into the arena of mock-courtly lyric (since many of the FYI poems are dedicated to Bill Berkson, with whom the poet was in unrequited love). O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” (1954) finds its speaker “tallying up the merits of each / of the latrines” across the cruising grounds of mid-century Manhattan. But O’Hara’s “sentimental longing for number” was also inseparable from his day job, since “tallying” is built into the work of organization men (Collected 255). Whether performed by curators or clerks (O’Hara was both in his MoMA career), the tallying and sorting at the heart of bureaucracy are never far removed from what “A City Winter” (1952) calls “the fierce inventories / of desire” (Collected 76).

In queer life, as the underground gay novelist John Rechy understood, numbers have a way of becoming their own reward. In Rechy’s 1967 novel Numbers, in fact, the hustler Johnny Rio confirms his own desirability by “scoring” with enough people to prove that he is still “wanted”; though he limits the number to 30, he compulsively surpasses it. What gives one pause in O’Hara is not just his Rechy-like endorsement of (infinite) quantity over (determinate) quality but of figuration and the combinatorial personhood that figuring – understood as both counting and embodying – entails. O’Hara’s own “longing for number,” in other words, is of a piece with his investment in figure (the latter is, after all, another name for number), an interest deemed unseemly (or simply effeminate) by the artists and critics who dominated postwar New York, the heyday of heroic abstractionism. O’Hara’s cheeky commitment to figure is akin to the one that governs his friend (and fellow gay artist) Jasper Johns’s similarly mischievous reduction of figures to numbers in many of his 1950s paintings. Like the “longing for number” as though it were an object (rather than a measure of objects), the painting of numbers as though they were bodies (rather than abstract symbols) puts an undue pressure on the means-ends distinction that art is supposed to secure.

Counting thus bears an interesting relation to figures, including bodily figures, in O’Hara: both are understood to be instrumental units. And this construal in turn bears an interesting relation to the severity with which 1950s morality punished inadmissible forms of physical contact. O’Hara’s poems abound with contorted and entangled figures, from the “better hapier St. Sebastian” in “Having a Coke” (the iconic twisted male figure in Western Art) to O’Hara’s ballet-dancing lover Vincent Warren (who makes stealth cameos in his lyrics) to the oblique invocation of Isadora Duncan in “2 Poems from the O’Hara Monogatari” (which finds the speaker “tossing
my scarf about my neck” and putting “hands on ankles feet on wrists” [213])
to the scene in “At Kamin’s Dance Bookshop” where the speaker “seemed
to be wearing tights entwined with your legs” (403) to “the dancers with
their tights and shoes / / who are often mistaken for worker-outers at the
Y” (371) in “Steps” to the “women on a lawn with their arms twined” (432)
in “Seven Nine Seven” to, finally, Lana Turner, whose name spells out the
privileging of twisted figuration in his poetry and whose body, as if acting
out the risks associated with turning figures, “has collapsed” in “Poem.” If
O’Hara’s preferred trope is apostrophe (“Oh Lana Turner we love you get
up!” [449]), the figure of loss, his recourse to strophe – the dancer’s step –
likewise anchors him to a world in which bodily integrity is destined to
be violated or transformed. That he did not reject this effacement of indi-
viduals but treated it as the basis for sociability suggests a close affinity
between his self-fashioning and the bureaucratic self roundly condemned
in 1950s culture and beyond. O’Hara took to an extreme the “dependent”
figure of the white-collar manager who is, as C. Wright Mills says, “always
somebody’s man.”21

O’Hara’s poems move the reflexive understanding found in postwar fic-
tion in a different direction. Whereas much of that fiction invidiously
distinguished those who can pass from those who can’t, O’Hara’s lavish
encomiums to contrapposto and equally outré declarations of dependency
(“All I want is boundless love”) both embody and reflect on the spectacle
of sissyhood (Collected 97). We might even hazard that O’Hara overacted
the spectacle he makes of himself in a willful troubling of gender and erotic
decorum. The surplus identities that proliferate in his poems provoke a cat-
egory confusion intended to disable – simply by flooding the space of – an
antigay semiotics (252). Speaking of his “several likenesses . . . like numer-
als,” O’Hara writes in “In Memory of My Feelings” (1956): “I am a Hittite
in love with a horse . . . I am a girl walking downstairs in a red pleated dress
with heels / I am a champion taking a fall / I am a jockey with a sprained
asshole” (252, 256). Such anaphoric catalogs – typical of O’Hara’s dedi-
cation to both Whitman and camp, the aesthetic of incongruity – seem
intent on pushing back against the confinements to which gay possibility
is subjected even as they also reproduce the most glaringly compromised
positions associated with the homophobic typology of queer being, like
“the image of a sissy truck-driver” in “Naphtha” (1959) (338).

Giving full-throated voice to an antic queer identity, O’Hara demon-
strates something close to the limit of what openness looks like in pre-
Stonewall America. His art world surroundings were the precondition for
such a possibility, alongside the fact that even his most provocative work
was written to an almost private audience (O’Hara was a “coterie” poet, to use Shaw’s apt term). This is not to deny O’Hara’s originality. Many gay men and women lived cosmopolitan lives surrounded by artists without taking his steps. But it nonetheless suggests that even in the most auspicious circumstances, queer life of necessity took place in the shadows. Part of O’Hara’s genius was not simply to shine a light on those shadows but, bypassing the apologetics infusing the work of contemporary homophiles embarrassed by their unmentionable peers, to encourage you to visit them too.

I will conclude by looking at a poet very different from O’Hara, even as they shared an attraction to members of their own sex, in order to consider another approach to 1950s homosexuality that is scarcely captured by “the closet,” our default category for compassing the gay and lesbian past. Elizabeth Bishop partnered with women all through college and her career in New York before spending fifteen years in Brazil with the wealthy and butch Lota de Macedo Soares in a relationship that each considered a marriage. Yet while there is no shortage of evidence with regard to Bishop’s romantic life, it would be a kind of category mistake to infer from it anything so certain as an orientation or self-professed identity. Though Bishop may have slept with women, she refused to identify as a lesbian. It was even a matter of aesthetic principle. Rejecting the confessional mode of poetry fashionable among her contemporaries, Bishop told an interviewer in 1967: “You just wish they’d keep some of those things to themselves.”

Such prudery can hardly take us unawares. The words that come to critics’ minds when faced with Bishop’s poetry are “reticent,” “measured,” “reserved.” Yet Bishop’s circumspection takes a more suggestive form than many readers have noticed. Reticence in Bishop everywhere takes the form not of reluctance but – in an echo of Vidal’s Jim Willard – of the “pretty ordinary.” The care with which her verse is crafted is enlisted, it would seem, in the service of bestowing a profound sense of averageness on events. “Our visions coincided,” the speaker in “Poem” says before she catches her rhetorical inflation: “visions’ is too serious a word – our looks.” Bishop’s poems strive to keep at bay any threat of being taken in by glamour or wonder; they work hard at anticlimax. “The Seven Wonders of the World are tired / and a touch familiar,” she writes in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” (57). This tendency seems to have been on Marianne Moore’s mind when she wrote to Bishop in 1938: “I can’t help wishing you would sometime, in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience.”
Moore’s letter echoes a complaint often leveled in feminist and queer scholarship against Bishop’s stubborn incommunicativeness. Because her poems appear guarded and risk-averse, it has been hard to engage them on the grounds that recent critics have wanted to read them: as testimonials to her lesbianism. Some critics have thus chosen to interpret the poems as overflowing with a desire that their tone or mood appears to deny, on the assumption that only in our post-Stonewall age does sexuality reveal itself with anything close to clarity, shorn of the crazed refractions of the closet. By contrast, I propose that Bishop is not invested in concealing her erotics so much as in making it all but impossible to be thrilled at the prospect of a lesbian spectacle, precisely by making lesbian desire unthrilling.

It will help in clarifying this point to look at “The Shampoo,” the last poem in Bishop’s 1955 volume A Cold Spring and a poem from whose lesbian subtext no modern critic demurs. But what is explicitly lesbian about the poem is hard to say. The poem’s sense is this: a person is washing another person’s hair. “‘Shampoo’ celebrates a serious, tender practical rite between two women,” according to no less an authority on lesbian existence than Adrienne Rich. Yet how do we know these are two women? Nothing in the poem allows us to raise that speculation to the level of a fact. Even if we concede that shampoo is a feminine product, or that only women would wash one another’s hair, it remains difficult to figure what about this poem – its stuttering meter, its muted rhyme scheme, its conceit about a figure (a studiously gender-neutral “dear friend”) who has a rather casual relation to grooming – has made critics see in it the only palpable admission of Bishop’s homosexuality (Poems 82). The poem makes so little sense, one might say, that scholars have decided that its disorienting images must be indirect signals of a queer secret, on the view that any opacity is a sign of same-sex desire. Yet since we can only know that this is a poem about two women in love if we already know that Bishop is a woman who loved another woman, the poem strictly speaking reveals absolutely nothing.

Whereas O’Hara’s work abounds in tangled and incomplete bodies (torsos in particular), the virtual absence of physical bodies actually makes it hard to see “The Shampoo” as a poem about two people, much less two women. The poem undercuts its own effort to frame two figures, in fact, by resorting to abstractions on nothing short of a cosmic scale (“the rings around the moon,” “shooting stars”) (ibid.). Alongside the jarring shifts in perspective implied by the “still explosions” of the “lichen” and their engagement with “the rings around the moon,” such diction seems to confer on the poem a kind of unaccountability (ibid.). Our commonsense
intuition that it is two women can never be confirmed (though in the interest of full disclosure it should be noted that the “shooting stars” are an obvious reference to the twin streaks of white running through Lota Soares’s jet-black hair). Yet the poem’s lack of certitude does not license the salacious gossip occasioned by open secrets – the kind that proliferate around Therese and Carol in The Price of Salt, say, or Beth and Laura in Odd Girl Out – so much as it effects a steadfast vagueness. The poem in other words withholds the shock of recognition by replacing it with the frustration of misrecognition. In a final irony, the poem’s description of erotic pleasure is embedded in a narrative about cleanliness. It is as squeaky clean as erotic poems get.

The point here is not to suggest that Bishop sanitizes homoeroticism. (For all its abstractness, indeed, the language of “The Shampoo” vibrates with joy.) She offers instead a departure from the scandalous homosexual spectacles that 1950s culture practically mandated through the dialectic of repression and exposure it fomented. Yet Bishop also deflects the most frequent reaction to that mandate among her queer contemporaries, whose gay-themed compositions were judged meritorious or not on the basis of their restraint or excess. Thomas Hal Philips’s The Bitter-weed Path (1950), a novel of cross-generational male love set in rural Mississippi and based on the unimpeachably highbrow Old Testament story of David and Jonathan, was lauded by critics who found its “pleasant lack of attempted sensationalism,” as one put it, a salutary rebuke to the lurid Southern Gothic of Tennessee Williams. Williams’s notoriety for the morbid and vulgar was not undeserved. His 1958 one-act Suddenly, Last Summer reads like an homage to the Grand Guignol. The play finds the perverted Sebastian (who has been using his comely female cousin as bait to lure boys to him) cannibalized by a gang of teenagers in a Mediterranean village. Neither domesticating same-sex eroticism nor making it louche and exotic, Bishop’s “The Shampoo” by contrast estranges desire. While steering clear of prurience, that is, Bishop’s poem nonetheless remains surpassingly weird. Yet though Williams’s play is as outrageous as Bishop’s poetry is subdued, it would be a mistake to imagine that Williams was not fully aware of the camp value of his stagecraft. Williams understood that reaching the bar for “restraint” in gay-authored narratives was a losing game, given that any mention of homosexuality was assumed to be essentially obscene. Almost from their inception, his plays were scrutinized for pornographic subject matter, however far removed they were from any explicit homosexual content. If Suddenly, Last Summer features both a truth serum and a threatened lobotomy as crucial plot
devices, it is almost certainly because Williams was mocking his very public disrepute as a drama queen given to histrionics.

We find in William’s hyperbolic erotic imaginings in Suddenly, Last Summer, as in Bishop’s purgative ones in “The Shampoo,” what all the writers I have discussed have in common: the effort to thwart or sabotage or otherwise find workarounds for Cold War culture’s homosexual identikit. Frequently that effort took shape as self-closeting, exile, distancing from queer communities, or all of the above. Occasionally, as with O’Hara, it took shape as a lavishly overt though strategically confusing self-display. Always, it took the form of a keenly self-aware reckoning with the perils of the straight state. What is most remarkable about the varied responses to the forces that would undermine gay and lesbian identity and sociability in the 1950s is how skillful so many gay men and lesbian were at contorting those forces in the project of finding one another. Gay liberation did not invent rich and vibrant gay and lesbian communities. It built on them.

NOTES

1 Henry Abelove, Deep Gossip (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 73, 75.
7 James Barr, Quatrefoil (Boston: Alyson, 1982), 124.
12 Vin Packer, Spring Fire (San Francisco: Cleis 2004), 102.
15 Ann Bannon, Beebo Brinker (San Francisco: Cleis, 2001), 50.
16 Abelove, Deep Gossip, 76.