

Kamryn White

Capstone Fall 2013

The New Normal

Writing about romantic female relationships can be traced back over 2500 years. But until recently, they have tended to perpetuate the narrow stereotypes of lesbianism. These recent narratives create new depictions of lesbianism that disrupt stereotypes and appear in a variety of media: non-traditional memoir, television and web series, and fiction novel. Not only are these authors saying something new, but they are using media in new ways to do it.

Alison Bechdel's memoir is in the form of a graphic novel. Her work, *Fun Home*, challenges the narrative of the closeted suicidal homosexual who lives a parallel life. Jenji Kohan's *Orange is the New Black*, produced by Netflix as a web-series, manipulates the commonly exaggerated stereotypical lesbian relationship in its attempts to create a new depiction of a more real lesbian life. And lastly, Jeanette Winterson's nonlinear novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* constructs histories and stories in the face of cultural and familial rejection and persecution.

Each of these reject and challenge the common narratives that they are up against. All of our narratives about sexuality, both heterosexual and homosexual, are based on our assumptions and the stories told about sexuality. In response to this notion, philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault claims that the categorization of both normal and abnormal sexual preferences and sexuality took place at a specific historical moment. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains how sexuality has come to be understood, citing Victorian discourse as the source. While the common narrative of the Victorian era is focused on the subjugation of sexual expression, Foucault argues against this view of Victorians and instead demonstrates how terribly obsessed with sex Victorians actually were. In his creation of a new narrative surrounding Victorian sexuality, Foucault notes that the term sexuality did not exist prior to

the Victorians but is in fact a historical construction occurring at this specific time and place.

Within this Victorian construction, multiple forms of sexuality were defined, naming what they considered to be abnormal sexual acts as “a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” (Foucault 1634). The narrative of “perverse pleasure” came to not only tell the story behind certain acts, but developed into a descriptive category of identification. Annamarie Jagose, author of *Queer Theory*, notes that “after 1870 same-sex acts began to be read as evidence of a particular type of person about whom explanatory narratives began to be formed” (11). In the creating, defining, and labeling of homosexuality, Victorians told a specific story about same-sex relationships. This story progressed from the narrative of the abnormal and perverse homosexual act into a pathologized homosexual identity, which became the common discourse surrounding same-sex relations for over a century. It was not until 1986 that homosexuality was removed entirely from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and it was no longer deemed a disorder.

Until recently, much of society has been stuck in the Victorian's repressed representation of sexuality. While the perversion and pathologization of the Victorian era established the basis of common conceptions of homosexuality, it is significant to note “the disappearance of lesbian[ism]” (Case 164). Lesbian literary scholar Terry Castle has characterized lesbians as having been “ghosted” out of history. In her work *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, she poses and answers the questions: “Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian—even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been 'ghosted' – or made to seem invisible- by culture itself” (Castle 4). As part of their obsession with abnormal sexuality, Victorians categorized same-sex relationships using only male examples in their studies and did not address female same-sex relationships. Even Foucault's theorization from the 1980s focuses on male homosexuality. A survey of

popular lesbian novels of the 1980s and 1990s, conducted by Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, observed a tendency to create a lesbian history where one does not exist. They found a “lesbian tradition” was recovered as a response to the absence of lesbianism in historical records. Such novels tend “‘simply to insert a mirror-image of a contemporary lesbian into an earlier historical period,’ and may suppress sexual and historical complexities” (175). Following Foucault's argument that a homosexual identity did not exist before Victorians, Doan and Waters recognize that one cannot simply place a lesbian into a context in which they did not exist. Instead of using historical novels to try to create a narrative using contemporary lesbians, we should instead use these depiction in the creation of new lesbian narratives.

Now to the new. Marshall Kirk and Hunter Maden, authors of *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 1990's*, understood the need to create new narratives surrounding homosexuality. They specifically focused on narratives that would work against the ghosting out of lesbians and would attempt to change old perceptions of pathologized homosexuality. Kirk and Maden realized that in order to incite change, a new narrative about homosexuality needed to be told, and told frequently. The object of their text was to “push the right buttons” by “halting, derailing, or reversing the 'engine of prejudice'” (Kirk and Maden 148). In order for these buttons to be pressed and a new narrative be told, Kirk and Maden recommended the “desensitization” of the heterosexual population. That is, to make the unthreatening homosexual narrative so common that it would cease to be of concern. They wrote:

If gays present themselves – or allow themselves to be presented – as overwhelmingly different and threatening, they will put straights on a triple-red alert, driving them to overt acts of political oppression or physical violence. If however, gays can live alongside straights, visibly but as inoffensively as possible, they will arouse a low-grade alert only, which, though

annoying to straights, will eventually diminish for purely physiological reasons. Straights will be desensitized... If straights can't shut off the shower, they may at least eventually get used to being wet. (Kirk and Maden 149)

Kirk and Maden believed that the best way to present these inoffensive depictions of homosexuality was through a continuous flow of homosexual material through various media, relying on past narratives in order to reflect on common social attitudes and assumptions before then disrupting them. Kirk and Maden also support the use of popular and accessible media as the means for this continuous flow. Three writers in particular tell new narratives using the forms of media discussed by Kirk and Maden.

The first of these is Alison Bechdel, who uses the unusual form of the graphic novel for her memoir *Fun Home*. This work provides a new narrative regarding homosexual suicide while challenging the longstanding belief that “gays are suicidally unhappy because they are gay” (Kirk and Maden 57). Her work attempts to understand and explain her relationship with her father by retracing her childhood and family life, which allows for the examination of her own lesbianism, her father's closeted homosexuality, and the strain that these placed on their relationship, which she believes led to his suicide.

This narrative of the suicidal homosexual is backed by studies generalizing that homosexuals are “more prone to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, paranoia, depression, and unhappiness than straights” (59). Some claim that Radclyffe Hall's 1928 lesbian classic *The Well of Loneliness* supports this notion. Her work has often been criticized for being strongly influenced by the sexist and anti-homosexual attitudes of her time. Her “portrayal of lesbians as usually unhappy and defective creatures can be seen as apologetic and full of self-loathing” (Mondimore 66). Nevertheless, “being the story of

a woman's life, her thoughts, emotions, and loves as well as her disappointments, *The Well of Loneliness* provides encouragement and validation to lesbians about their sexuality” (66). Additionally, her work required a commitment to lesbianism that “demanded a much sharper break from traditional expectation of 'proper' womanhood than did the corresponding choice for men” (Emilio 93). While Bechdel's work heavily focuses on her father's sexuality, his story is used to examine her own lesbianism. So while *Fun Home* recognizes the loneliness and unhappiness of her father's experiences, his experiences are used to emphasize her own life, thoughts, emotions, and love, just as Hall did within *The Well of Loneliness*.

Put simply, Bechdel describes her work as a story of “how my closeted gay dad killed himself a few months after I came out to my parents as a lesbian” (Thurman). But *Fun Home* is much more than that. Her exploration tells a richly contradictory story of her father's life, making him “more than a pedophile, suicide, or tragic homosexual” (Cvetkovich 113). In doing so, Bechdel explores her own sexuality and the ways in which their respective sexualities influenced their relationship. To do this, Bechdel explores key points of her childhood.

Her father, Bruce, vigilantly attempted to maintain Alison's femininity when she was a child. This can be seen in the simple act of forcing her to dress in a feminine manner and wear a barrette in her hair, continuously putting it back in after she removes it. Alison's unwillingness to wear the barrette represents a greater battle of her resistance to his attempts to make her more feminine. There is another scene in which Alison and Bruce are sitting in a diner and a “truck-driving bulldyke” walks in. Bechdel remembers recognizing her “with a surge of joy,” as if she were seeing “someone from home.” It is within this scene that Alison comes into the sudden knowledge, or at least recognition, of her own sexual identity. It reads, “I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's

haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home – someone they've never spoken to, but know by sight – I recognized her with a surge of joy” (Bechdel 118). While this moment is significant in Alison's consciousness of identity, it is her father's response that is a key signifier of their relationship. He asks, “Is *that* what you want to look like?” which discourages Alison from admitting the strong connection she felt to the truck-driver (118).

Bruce's sexuality also plays a fundamental role in his relationship with his daughter. His sexuality “encompasses not only his attraction to young men but also his devotion to literature and home restoration, his emotionally volatile relation to his wife and children, and his artistic ambitions” (Cvetkovich 113). A key moment in understanding her father occurs when Alison comes across a photograph that creates the centerfold of Bechdel's novel. This two-page spread is a reproduction of a Polaroid photo of the family's young male babysitter named Roy. The photo, taken by her father during a family vacation, shows Roy laying with his arms raised behind his head in only his underwear on a motel bed.

Emphasizing the image's ability to disrupt her family's history, the next page shows the strip of negatives from their beach trip, including three sun-filled shots of Alison and her brothers on the beach, and one darker shot of Roy on the motel bed. The images unveil Bruce's ability to inhabit two worlds simultaneously. In an interview, Bechdel describes coming across the photograph in an envelope marked “FAMILY” in her father's handwriting shortly after his death. She was “startled by this disturbing visual and material evidence of his parallel life taking place in the room next to where she and her brothers were sleeping and in the midst of their childhood fun on the beach” (Chute 1006). Bechdel continues her examination of the photograph in noticing the year stamped on the photo is crossed out. She notes, “It's a curiously ineffectual attempt at censorship. Why cross out the year and

not the month? Why, for that matter, leave the photo in the envelope at all? In an act of prestidigitation typical of the way my father juggled his public appearance and private reality, the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed” (Bechdel 101). Another of the thoughts depicted around the image is that “perhaps I identify too well with my father’s illicit awe” (101). Here, Bechdel is not only criticizing her father’s sexuality and his relationship with it, but her own, as well as the complex connections between the two.

The secrecy surrounding her father’s sexuality is further contextualized within Bechdel’s small-town rural upbringing. These surroundings are contrasted as Bechdel describes one of her family’s periodic trips to New York City, both before and during the time of the Stonewall Riots preceding the Gay Liberation Movement. It is these trips that “appear to have given her father access to an overtly gay culture” (Cvetkovich 123). Within her description, she references cultural histories, communities, and liberations taking place in New York. Although her father may have gained access to an openly gay culture in New York, upon his return home to rural Pennsylvania, the guilt and ambivalence again overshadowed any thrill felt from his double life. As such, in Pennsylvania he continued to not assume an openly gay identity, even post-Stonewall.

By inserting her family’s story within that of a larger public history and geographical circumstance, Bechdel is able to simultaneously discuss “other temporalities and histories that pervade the national public even as they remain largely invisible within it- her father’s queerness and her own incipient lesbianism” (123). The references to histories of sexual liberation and community in New York City also suggest that her and her father’s histories and experiences might be significantly different. Alison “comes out in a culture of 1970s lesbian feminism that is part of her college experience,” while her father generally lacked “access to a social world that might allow him to assume

a more overtly gay identity” (123). Alison's homosexual experience exists in a time of more visible lesbianism: “lesbians are becoming more visible as a new generation of gay women are coming out and coming of age in ways that are distinctly their own” (Ciasullo 582). While Alison lives in the new narrative of lesbian feminism, Bruce lived securely in the narrative of the pathologized homosexual.

Bechdel complicates this notion by not allowing a “retrospective enlightenment” to resolve his death or cast her father as a victim of history. She recognizes that doing so would only be in an attempt to “render my senseless loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia” (Bechdel 196). Here, Bechdel refuses any easy distinctions between heroes and victims. Even so, she is able to represent her father with compassion and complexity: “By representing not only her own lesbian identity (as part of a generation that is repeatedly erased or misrepresented in the public sphere) but also her father's stigmatized identity, she enlarges the scope” of the homosexual narrative and specifically addresses the narrative that allows for homosexuals to be suicidal (Cvetkovich 125).

The enlargement of the scope of homosexual narratives is done not only through the content of her father's pathologized homosexuality and her own incorporated, un-ghosted, sexuality, but also through the graphic-novel medium. The novel is intricately crafted and takes full advantage of the graphic-novel format, emphasizing “the rhymes and ironies and reiterations between words and pictures so perfectly expressing the narrative's conflicting point of view” (Days). The novel often returns to the same memories on multiple occasions, each time searching for a new clue, perspective, or interpretation. Upon each return to an already visited scene, the reader is able to peer deeper into Alison's life. While she finds herself living in the new narrative of lesbian feminism, each time Bechdel

circles back over the same event, the veil cloaking lesbianism is further lifted.

Just as Bechdel enlarges the scope to reveal a new narrative of lesbianism, Kirk and Maden's campaign also broadened the delivery of homosexual narratives. The campaign Kirk and Maden composed recognized the significant role that the media held in making up for the lack of direct contact that the public had with openly homosexual Americans. They wrote, "Familiarization with gays through the media prepares the public for the gradual desensitization, jamming, and conversion that will take place during [the gay] community's slow-motion coming-out party" (Kirk and Maden 169). By allowing the public to become familiar with "likeable gays," new narratives can begin to be told concerning the homosexual community.

One of the significant media that this new narrative occupies is that of the television. Television was recognized as a useful medium for their campaign in that it attracted an unparalleled breadth of audience, consisting of a "thorough mixture of lower- and middle-class Americans, of all ages, races, and creed" (200-201). In addition to its wide audience, the television is noted as the "most graphic and intrusive medium" for their message (201). In order for Kirk and Maden to use the television to create a new narrative of homosexuality, they recognized the need "to change the picture in the picture/label pair that represents [homosexuality] in the public's mind. To this end, television is the most cogent medium, combining sight, sound, and motion to make new pictures so vivid that they can displace the old" (201). A number of shows have featured homosexual characters; however, the type of depictions have varied.

While many television series have included lesbian characters, many have partaken in what has been deemed "the lesbian kiss episode." This involves a seemingly heterosexual female character engaging in a kiss with a possibly lesbian character, mostly done in order to boost ratings when a show

is looking to impress advertisers. *NY Times* columnist Virginia Heffernan describes the benefits of the lesbian kiss episode: “Eminently visual; cheap, provided the actors are willing; controversial, year in and year out; and elegantly reversible (they typically vanish or go straight when the week's over)” (Heffernan). Actresses taking part in the lesbian kiss episode within their series have often confirmed the motivation behind the act. In an interview, actress Michele Greene from *L.A. Law* confirmed her kiss with a woman in 1991 “was a ratings ploy in which there was never any intention on the part of producers to seriously explore the possibility of a relationship between two women” (Warn). Heffernan continues in her description of the lesbian kiss, noting:

The kisses are said to break new ground... we seem to forget that we've seen them before. Many times. And though the target audience for these kisses may now skew younger – it's teenagers doing the kissing now, as opposed to Ellen DeGeneres and Roseanne Barr in stunts past – the kissing scenes, with the big build-up and the quick, chaste, fully dressed payoff, ought to be familiar by now. (Heffernan)

In addition to the short term kissing, other shows have featured more longterm lesbian roles and story-lines. Some of the prominent shows include *The L Word*, which ran for six seasons, and *Pretty Little Liars*, an ongoing series with four seasons under its belt. While these shows offer “an important common reference for queer women,” they have also been frequently criticized for portraying only overly sexualized and manicured lesbians as a “reductive cross-section of an infinitely diverse population” (Cauterucci).

This cross-sectional view of lesbianism is seen as many mainstream representations of lesbians depict a “straightened out” version of homosexuality. The femme or lipstick-lesbians seen in shows like *The L Word* and *Pretty Little Liars* have been heterosexualized to embody culturally traditional

definitions of femininity. Ann Ciasullo, author of “Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s,” notes that lesbians are made into objects of desire for straight audiences. She claims that this occurs through heterosexualization, “a process achieved by representing the lesbian as embodying hegemonic femininity and thus, for mainstream audiences, as looking 'just like' conventionally attractive straight women” (Ciasullo 578). The feminine is being used to sanitize popular conceptions of lesbianism. These depictions of heterosexualization have aided to a limited representation of lesbianism.

Instead of this limited representation, Jenji Kohan's Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black*, uses stereotypical depictions of lesbian relationships to disrupt common narratives and provide new alternatives. Set in a woman's federal prison, the show portrays characters that fit many common narratives surrounding lesbianism, including the masculine or butch and femme stereotypes as well as a common anti-homosexual agenda. It is significant to note that while the butch lesbian has been synonymous with lesbian in cultural imagination, she has been significantly absent from cultural representation (Ciasullo 579). The butch lesbian has been a sort of mascot that heterosexual culture nominated to represent conceptions of lesbianism. This image includes “the angry, militant, lesbian feminist, the butch, the woman who deep down wants to be a man and thus eschews all accoutrements of femininity” (585). This mascot has been labeled by heterogeneous society but has not been provided with a platform for representation. Some argue that there is something to be said for interrupting the butch mascot of lesbianism through the inclusion of femme lesbians in shows such as *The L Word*; however, the focus on solely femme lesbians has simply led to a re-inscription of the narrow mainstream norms for lesbianism.

Orange is the New Black differs in its presentation of a variety of characters and discourse. *Orange* provides both butch and femme characters a platform for representation and does so with a new

purpose. Terms such as butch or femme are used within *Orange* not to be reductive of the variety found within lesbianism. Instead, these terms are used in discussions of mainstream culture's understanding of lesbianism, where ideas about lesbianism are less diversified. *Orange* presents characters and discourse meant to counter typical stereotypes. In total, the cast includes a broad spectrum of gender and sexual preferences, including butch lesbians, threatening predators, femmes, situational lesbians, and a transgender woman. *Orange* responds to a variety of these shared viewpoints by using both the stereotypical as well as more realistic depictions of sexuality.

The series, based on Piper Kerman's memoir of the same name, revolves around the main character Piper, a clean-cut yuppie supplier of artisan bath products from Connecticut. She matches the vegan eating, designer wearing, yoga practicing woman that tends to populate much of popular media. As such, her character can be understood within the narrative that makes up modern media and her personal narrative is recognizable. But she is in prison.

In the second episode of the series, Piper has offended the prison's cook and finds herself being “starved out” of the kitchen. The cook, Big Red, ordered her staff to deny Piper meals and no inmate would disobey such an order. The episode then flashes back to a time out of prison in which Piper did a lemon and cayenne pepper cleanse. Although viewers may not have personally partaken in such a cleanse, this is a story that is recognizable within the narrative of the media and allows her to be contextualized. In addition to her sweet and wholesome appearance, Piper's personal narrative includes her engagement to her fiance Larry. It is not until you already recognize the narrative that makes up Piper's character that she thoroughly discusses her past relationship with a woman and then resumes that relationship. This decade-old relationship with a lesbian drug-runner named Alex results in her arrest and yearlong sentence at Litchfield Federal Prison, where the show takes place and both are

serving time.

Although *Orange* draws you into Piper's character before her own graphic lesbian sex scenes unfold, Piper is the source of opposing stereotypes as well. After telling Larry about her relationship with Alex, both past and present, Larry asks Piper if she turned gay again now that she has reconnected with her ex-girlfriend. But Piper refuses to be pigeonholed as either a lesbian or a straight woman. She then explains the Kinsey scale to Larry, saying that “You don't just turn gay. You fall somewhere on a spectrum.” Although the Kinsey scale is just one of the many measurements of sexuality, it is one that allows gradations between exclusively homosexual or exclusively heterosexual histories and desires, and the position on the scale can change at any given point in time. In teaching this to her fiancé, Piper is also teaching this new narrative to much of the audience that may still believe that an individual has to be exclusively one sexual orientation: gay or straight.

Just as Piper teaches Larry and the audience about the spectrum of sexuality, the variety of characters within the show demonstrates the variety found within the lesbian community. A fan of the show discusses the *8 Ways 'Orange is the New Black' is breaking TV Barriers*. Third on this list is “Ladies of all sexual preferences... lots of preferences” (Bullock). The fan notes that instead of exclusively depicting either manicured or butch lesbians, as found in many other television shows such as *The L Word*, *Orange* has “a broad spectrum of gender and sexuality” (Bullock). This spectrum includes a butch lesbian named Big Boo, the threatening and misunderstood Crazy Eyes/Sue, an ex-junkie named Nicky, the guilt-ridden situational lesbian Lorna, and Sophia, a transgender woman played by a transgender actress. The spectrum within *Orange* presents each of these characters as possessing approachable human lives, each with their own lesbian story.

The Advocate, a major Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender publication, has also commented on

the show, recently noting that *Orange* “is not just a fantastic female-centric series that could shift the cultural landscape of television – it could turn out to be TV's best lesbian series ever” (Anderson-Minshall). Mary McNamara of the *LA Times*, having written multiple articles on the show, also recognizes that *Orange*'s familiarity is paired with a new narrative of lesbian television. She writes, “It also has an all-woman cast of breathtaking diversity and dimension. Characters of every shape, race and background offer endless narrative possibility, and what starts off in familiar territory quickly takes viewers into a whole other kind of television” (McNamara, Talking TV). The familiar territory takes shape as the use of stereotypical depictions of homosexuality, which are used to demonstrate common narratives surrounding lesbianism.

In a second article written about *Orange*, McNamara also discusses the show's on-demand internet presence as a source for its cutting-edge capabilities. She writes, “That it takes a tale set in prison, appearing on Netflix, to display the most diverse cast in a show... says a lot about the limitations of even this golden age of television.. This is the most impressive group of female characters ever assembled in a series, and it's not just window-dressing; each woman has a story and that story will be told. Netflix may wind up changing the world after all’ (McNamara, Lock Yourself Up). *Orange* uses the freedom allowed in a web-series to manipulate the commonly exaggerated and stereotypical lesbian relationship in its attempts to create a new narrative depicting realistic lesbian life .

This depiction of real lesbian life includes not being naïve to those that do not find lesbianism socially acceptable. While characters with this point of view may initially illicit sympathy, they end up being shown as having narrow and restrictive views as well as great personal issues and insecurities. This is initially seen in correctional officer Sam Healy. He adamantly bans “lesbian activity” and has a deep seeded anti-homosexual agenda. A similar, yet much more intense, perspective is seen from

inmate Tiffany 'Pennsatucky' Doggett, a religious extremist with a controversial past. In short, she is a meth-head turned pro-life hero after shooting up her abortion clinic to the joy of Christian protestors. Like Healy, she does not agree with “lesbian activity” and even works with Healy to make this point very clear. During a going away party for an inmate about to be released, Piper and Alex are dancing intimately and taking part in “lesbian activity.” Pennsatucky tattles to Mr. Healy, telling him:

They're sexing Mr. Healy, I seen it. This morning in the bathroom, one girl's face was all up in the other's hoohaw. It was so nasty. It's an abomination. They were moaning and everything, speaking in tongues like it was some kinda revival... She a lesbian. They lesbianing together.

(Kohan S1E9)

Pennsatucky uses a religious foundation and terminology to reject and judge all lesbian relationships and behavior. Despite the consequences enforced after the dancing event and the struggles for Piper that follow, it is those that are open to lesbian life that end up on top, both mentally and physically.

The mental domination: At one point, Piper and Pennsatucky attempt to make amends; however, Pennsatucky's version of this includes forgiving Piper and then trying to force her to be baptized. Piper resists and begins a powerful soliloquy on her anti-religious beliefs and foundation in humanism that leaves Pennsatucky and her followers perplexed. The physical domination: The final scene of the season involves Pennsatucky attacking Piper with a shiv made from a wooden cross while Mr. Healy turns a blind eye and walks away. The scene ends with the tables turned and Piper on top of her, beating Pennsatucky seemingly to death (Kohan S1E13). Despite the violence of this scene, the message sent is that open-mindedness prevails. *Orange* not only shows real lesbian life through a variety of characters and rejects many stereotypes, but also challenges the idea of lesbians as victims. By making Piper victorious in her encounters with those that reject lesbianism or subscribe to stereotypes, *Orange* creates lesbian characters that are not just window-dressings but instead address realistic conflicts and controversies, and are even willing to get their hands dirty.

The inclusion of religious conflicts adds to the realistic depiction that *Orange* strives for. As one of the primary conflicts faced by the lesbian community, religion is a topic that often arises in discussing sexuality. Religious opposition has long been a standing argument against homosexuality and lesbianism. And as such, more than one of our authors discuss this conflict. Just as *Orange* pits itself against religious characters, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* discusses the complex negotiation of the self in the face of familial and religious ostracization.

Many critics have deemed this text Winterson's autobiography; however, in her actual autobiography, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson describes *Oranges* as “semi-autobiographical, in that it tells the story of a young girl adopted by Pentecostal parents. The girl is supposed to grow up and be a missionary. Instead she falls in love with a woman. Disaster” (2). The young girl and main character of the text has the same name as the author, Jeanette. She grew up in a strict home with fundamentalist religious beliefs. Her mother and the church believe in a black and white world of right and wrong, and true and false, where their understandings of the world are forced to fit into one or the other within this view.

Professor and author of “Integrating Fantasy and Reality in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*” Mara Reisman argues that it is the binary paradigm between right and wrong that Winterson wishes to disrupt. In order to disrupt this binary paradigm, a distinction between history and storytelling is made. Winterson writes, “People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe” (Winterson, *Oranges* 93). Stories are at the forefront of *Oranges* as Winterson lets anti-linear connections and fictitious stories guide the novel. Young Jeanette uses small connections in her narratives to jump from describing putting on too small pajamas, to being deaf for three months, to

being in the hospital, to falling in love. The seemingly real personal narrative of the novel is laced with make-believe stories which are used “to reconcile the conflicting things she reads in the Bible, or which she hears from her fanatically religious mother, and those she learns at school” (Xhonneux 103).

Despite her own combination of history and storytelling, Winterson recognizes that stories are often told to create balance and order, but that the construction of stories is a limited solution that can only offer a “pretend” sense of order and “a security that cannot exist” (Winterson, *Oranges* 95).

While Winterson's use of both history and storytelling can be read as indicative of the combination of fact and fiction within this semi-autobiographical tale, Winterson also compares the separation of stories and history to walls that can be knocked down: “Walls protect and walls limit. It is the nature of walls that they should fall” (112). Reisman discusses these walls, writing: “The biblical, fantasy, and personal narratives are the sites in *Oranges* where the nature of wall-like belief systems are scrutinized and where meaning and identity are affirmed, contested, and then either reaffirmed or deconstructed...Winterson complicates the 'truth' of each setting, disrupts the binary imperative, and reveals the spaces where changes can occur” (Reisman 11). One of walls Winterson scrutinizes within *Oranges* is that of her mother's fundamentalist church, particularly as it pertains to Jeanette's sexuality.

The church is discussed particularly during Jeanette's narration and negotiation of her first love. Jeanette “inadvertently challenges the seemingly innocuous ideologies [of the church]... by falling in love with a woman” (Reisman 22). From her mother's and pastor's point of view, Jeanette can choose either her first love Melanie, or she can love the Lord, but she cannot love them both. Jeanette does not understand this; she uses what she has learned in the Bible and reasons that “Melanie is a gift from the Lord, and it would be ungrateful not to appreciate her” (Winterson, *Oranges* 104). She also cites Titus 1:15, “To the pure all things are pure” (105). In her innocence, she does not let Pastor Finch's

interpretation of the Bible circumscribe her life or desires. Instead she declares her love for both women and the church. She reconciles religion and lesbian love in a model that makes sense to her; however, it does not make sense in the eyes of Pastor Finch or her mother.

While she is then cut off from the church and her family, this experience allows Jeanette to come to the understanding that “acceptable” sexual desire is a both a cultural and religious construction. Once she understands this, she finds she can then renegotiate these standards. While Jeanette is innocent in her renegotiation of sexual standards, Winterson is more crass in her memoir. She describes her sexual coming of age as very funny, writing, “It was very bad for me that my deafness happened at around the same time as I discovered my clitoris” (Winterson 2011). Despite the differences in the approaches, Winterson is ultimately renegotiating sexual standards by deconstructing the ideologies she was raised in. The innocent and less graceful approaches allow for the acknowledgement of her sexuality. In doing so, Jeanette reveals her lesbianism for herself.

According to Peggy Dunn Bailey, author of “Writing 'Herstory': Narrative Reconstruction in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*,” Jeanette's acknowledgement of her sexuality and deconstruction of the church's ideologies demonstrates the negotiation that exists between the self and the surrounding world. Bailey writes that by coming to term with both of these, Jeanette “demonstrates the ways in which self and reality are narrative constructions” (61). This is demonstrated through a scene with Jeanette's friend and mentor Elsie. She tells Jeanette, “'There's this world,' she banged the wall graphically, 'and there's this world,' she thumped her chest. 'If you want to make sense of either, you have to take notice of both'” (Winterson, *Oranges* 32). Jeanette's interaction with Pastor Finch regarding Melanie is reflective of this notion. While she uses biblical references to make sense of her love for Melanie, she is also able to recognize the limitations and walls the church puts in place on

her definitions of love and sexuality.

As Jeanette learns to balance her own understanding with the understanding of those around her, the make-believe aspect of the work comes into full force. Jeanette finds herself assisted by an imaginary orange demon that is able to help her in a number of ways. The first is when she finds herself skeptical of the demon's presence; she turns to biblical references of demons being cast out. The demon counters, telling her "Don't believe all you read" which confirms Jeanette's suspicion of the truth or validity of everything taught directly from the Bible. In this confirmation, Jeanette becomes aware of the construction of her surroundings and the contradiction that exist.

The demon also assists by leaving her with a rough brown pebble that is meant to remind her of her true feelings. The pebble "represents the intersection of interior and exterior knowledge until Jeanette can combine the two and make sense of them herself" (Reisman 24). In the introduction to *Oranges*, Winterson describes Jeanette as "someone on the outside of life [who] has to deal with the big questions that cut across class, culture, and colour" (xvi). Within the negotiation of her sexuality, Jeanette addresses many "big questions" and is often left to find both the interior and exterior answers on her own. As she negotiates the difference between the two, Jeanette develops her understanding of the limitations of the world in which she was raised. Just as the acknowledgement of her sexuality allows her lesbianism to be, in Terry Castle's terms, un-ghosted within herself, she also un-ghosts her sexuality as she learns to negotiate with exterior surroundings.

Jeanette's stories and imagination aid her in the creation of a world in which she fits and can make sense of her sexuality. The depictions of Jeanette negotiating her own feelings with the feelings of those around her are used to demonstrate the ability to construct a personal history. While in the face of ostracization from both her religion and her family, Jeanette is able to use both reasoning and

imagination to reveal and understand her sexuality .

Understanding one's sexuality is something that each of the discussed works aims to accomplish. The characters within each work deal with their own issues of sexual identity, social acceptance, and the stigmatization of past narratives. Not only are these women able to create narratives embodying their version of lesbianism, they do so in unconventional ways. Although each takes on a different issue and a different medium, each of these examples illustrates ways in which common notions of lesbians are changed with new narratives. Bechdel's *Fun Home* argues for a more well-rounded perspective and against the pathologized suicidal interpretation of homosexuality defined by the Victorians. *Orange is the New Black* emphasizes the diversity and humanity found both in the lesbian community and in depictions of lesbians on television. *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* addresses constructing personal histories and facing religious and familial adversity and ostracization in order to negotiate one's sexuality.

The discussion of personal sexualities, inclusion of biographical content, and disruption of stereotypes allow readers to enter the world created by a narrative and accept each character as real people. Each of the characters are real with lives found beyond the limitations of the text, screen, or drawing. While providing the characters with lives beyond their text, lesbianism is also coming to life beyond previous limitations. The creation of new lesbian narratives works to counter-act the ghosting of lesbianism that has occurred. *Fun Home*, *Orange*, and *Oranges* each work to add lesbianism to the discourse of their genre. While each are very different narratives that approach their genres in non-traditional ways, they each disrupt the stigmatization of traditional narratives by un-ghosting lesbianism.

Works Cited

- Anderson-Minshall, Diane. "Why You Should Watch *Orange Is the New Black*." *The Advocate*. 10 July 2013. Web. 29 September 2013.
- Bailey, Peggy Dunn. "Writing 'Herstory': Narrative Reconstruction in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*." *The Philological Review* 32.2 (2006): 61 -78. Web. 13 October 2013.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. Print.
- Bullock, Darcy. "8 Ways 'Orange is the New Black' is Breaking TV Barriers." *Policymic*. Web. 29 September 2013.
- Case, Sue-Hellen. "The Apparitional Community." Rev of *The Apparitional Lesbian*. *The John Hopkins University Press* 49.1 (1996): 161-166. Web. 20 October 2013.
- Castle, Terry. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Print.
- Cauterucci, Christina. "Reality Bites: Why *The Real L Word* Is Bad for Lesbians." *Huffington Post: Gay Voices*. 25 May 2012. Web. 20 October 2013.
- Chute, Hillary, and Marianne DeKoven. Ed. "Graphic Narratives." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006). Web.
- Ciasullo, Ann. "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s." *Feminist Studies* 27.3 (2001). Web.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home.'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.5 (2008): 111-128. Web.
- Day, Steven. "A Review: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home the Musical*." *Live Culture*. 8 November 2013. Web.

- Emilio, John D. *Sexual Politics, sexual communities: the making of a 'homosexual minority in the United States*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. From *The History of Sexuality*. In D. Richter (Ed.), *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. Print.
- Heffernan, Virginia. "Critic's Notebook; It's February. Pucker UP, TV Actresses." *The New York Times*. 10 February 2005. Web.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press, New York 1996. Print.
- Kirk, Marshall and Hunter Maden. *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in 1990's*. New York: Plume, 1990. Print.
- Kohan, Jenji. *Orange Is the New Black*. Dir. Jenji Kohan. Netflix, 2013. Web series.
- Lemberg, Jennifer. "Closing the Gap in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *The Feminist Press at the City University of New York* 36.5 (2008): 129-140.
- McNamara, Mary. "Review: Lock yourself up with 'Orange Is the New Black.'" *Los Angeles Times*. 10 July 2013. Web.
- McNamara, Mary. "Talking TV: 'Orange is the New Black' is the new hot." *Los Angeles Times*. 15 August 2013. Web.
- Mondimore, Francis Mark. *A Natural History of Homosexuality*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.
- Reisman, Mara. "Integrating Fantasy and Reality in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*." *Rocky Mountain Review*. 65.1 (2011): 11-35. Web.
- Stevens, Hugh. Ed. "The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing." New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.

Thurman, Judith. "Drawn From Life: The World of Alison Bechdel." *The New Yorker*. 23 April 2012.

Web.

Warn, Sarah. "Interview with Michel Greene." AfterEllen.com. March 2003. Web.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1985. Print.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2011. Print.

Xhonneux, Lies. "The Classic Coming Out Novel: Unacknowledged Challenges to the Heterosexual Mainstream," *College Literature* 39.1 (2012): 94-119. Web.