Introduction

Narratives and Identity

In 1936, Edward VIII, king of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions and emperor of India, abdicated from the British throne to marry the twice-divorced American socialite Wallis Simpson. Edward's explanation seems quite straightforward: In a radio broadcast from Windsor Castle, he said that marrying mattered more than reigning as monarch. As Edward stated, he could not continue as king "without the help and support of the woman [he] love[d]." Edward also declared his brother to be better suited to reign, since he had "one matchless blessing, enjoyed by so many of you and not bestowed on me—a happy home with his wife and children."[1] At that moment, according to this script prepared for public consumption, married love trumped power, privilege, and even dignity as the king brought his private affairs forward to the public. This explanation may well have been a cover for even more questionable associations on the part of the king, including possibly treasonous relations with the Nazi state. Nonetheless, the response from the archbishop of Canterbury indicates a discomfort with the idea that marriage and sexuality mattered so dearly. According to the (London) *Times*, the archbishop stated that "of the motive that has compelled that renunciation we dare not speak."[2] The statement, oddly reminiscent of Lord Alfred Douglas's famous line "The love that dare not speak its name," hints that Edward's public declaration remained suspect not for what it covered up but for what it revealed—a central commitment to a sexual self. As Edward articulated it, love and sex had become essential to life rather than ancillary concerns to the more important matters of state.

Other prominent individuals also put their sexual stories at the center of their identities in interwar Britain. Radclyffe Hall, a well-known author with considerable money and cultural clout, self-consciously martyred herself for

the cause of sexual inversion. Not only did she write *The Well of Loneliness* as a plea for recognition of sexual inversion, but she did so believing in the terrible consequences that might result.[3] For Hall, the public recognition of sexual identity was worth a great deal. Quentin Crisp, the acclaimed raconteur and memoirist, offers another example of the interwar commitment to the sexual self. He publicly appeared in high heels, dyed hair, and makeup despite police harassment and violent beatings on the streets.[4] He believed that sexuality mattered, even in circumstances in which repression or circumspection would have made sense.

Less prominent but no less important were the tens of thousands of people who wrote of themselves as sexual subjects in letters to doctors, popular magazines, and each other between the end of the Great War and the beginning of World War II. Men and women—rich and poor, young and old, and in between—wrote such letters. They wrote from major cities and small towns, from England and across the empire and dominions: from Ilford, Glastonbury, Manchester, Glasgow, Sudan, Victoria, and Saskatchewan. When they mentioned occupations, they described themselves as gentleman farmers, intellectuals, laborers, sailors, soldiers, activists, domestics, teachers, workers, engineers, and housewives. They wrote to explain themselves, to describe themselves, to communicate with others, to garner information, and to testify to their own existence. The sheer number of these accounts speaks to the importance that people placed on the articulation of their sexual selves.

Their stories emerged as part of a broader process of identity formation. Modern identities emerged over multiple centuries. Over the course of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, people across Europe began to see themselves according to social class. Instead of being working class and then suddenly realizing it, they *became* working class, as E. P. Thompson's classic volume, *The Making of the English Working Class*, has shown.[5] With the formation of the nation-state, people defined themselves by nationality. Peasants became Frenchmen and Italians became a people.[6] By the end of the nineteenth century, sex and gender became paramount. Sexuality, according to Michel Foucault's account, became a central category, a key way that people began to see themselves as modern subjects with modern subjectivities.[7]

How that happened needs further clarification. A generation of scholars has shown that the Victorian focus on sexuality, the endless articulation of sex, gave rise to multiple streams of language that chattered on about sexuality and gender. These streams of discourse discussed bastardy, prostitution, onanism, hysteria, and other sorts of sexual actions deemed problematic. Coupled with that language of repression came an erotic focus that played out in pornography, ethnology, reportage, popular fiction, and science, to name just a few.[8] The proliferation of discourse saturated society with sexuality, and it was from this saturation that sexual identities began to emerge. Foucault suggests that sexology, the science of sexuality, bore special weight in the creation of new sexual identities.[9] Sexology encouraged the naming of sexual types and the creation of

standard sexual stories.[10] According to Foucault's model of identity formation, once codified, these typologies affected how people saw themselves. However, Foucault offers no real agency; instead, according to Rita Felski, "individuals recognized themselves in the interpersonal, medical descriptions of the sexologists and took on these sexual identities as their own."[11] Somehow, people took these theories and remade them into stories they told about themselves; they began to think of themselves in new ways and began to make use of theories to comprehend their inner selves and their own actions.

The question of agency in the dispersal of sexual stories is the core preoccupation of this book. This project suggests that popular culture provided a method for the dispersal of stories about sexuality. Popular culture—sometimes making use of sexological definitions and sometimes influenced by sexological research but often not—allowed people to read about sexual pleasures and to write of themselves as sexual actors. Popular culture became a place to read about sexuality, a place to articulate new stories of the self, and a place to consider the paraphernalia of desire. Magazines, popular science, pamphlets, and cheap triple-decker novels all offered the delights of the modern experience in highly accessible forms. Havelock Ellis, a British sexologist, wrote that women had bimonthly cycles of sexual arousal, but Marie Stopes, the best-selling author, popularized the idea.[12] Richard von Krafft-Ebing, another influential sexologist, coined the term *sadomasochism*, but magazines about sexual whipping flooded into the English market.[13] Sexologists defined *voyeurism* as sexual spectatorship, but the Windmill Theatre offered daily shows that let some ten million patrons look at nude women posed in erotic tableaux.[14] These performances allowed the largely male audience to understand watching as a sexual act.[15] Readers of sexology might have recognized a description of voyeurism and applied it to themselves in a few cases, but experiences at the Windmill made room for millions to consider themselves as sexual subjects even if they did not have a name to put on the act of watching. The importance of the tableaux experience reverberated even further, however, since one could see re-creations of the Windmill's performances in the pages of popular magazines such as *London Life*. The processes of attending a show, looking at magazines, and staring at pinups became methods for the transmission of sexual energy. Popular culture, in its many iterations, could have a multiplying effect. Whether or not popular culture mingled with the sexological, it affected the sorts of stories that people could conceptualize.

This account confirms the work done by Alison Oram in her exploration of cross-dressing women in the popular press. Her survey of stories about cross-dressed women finds few accounts influenced by sexology; instead, for much of the twentieth century, popular culture marveled at the mysterious and astounding cases of women's boldness at crossing the gender divide. While Oram originally expected to find that modern lesbian identities had emerged from sexological case studies, the shift to modern sexual identities did not happen until the 1940s, according to her findings. Instead, she finds "wonderment, oddity, and

the irrational" in narratives that circulated in the popular press.[16] This study documents a similar chronology of a delayed impact by sexology and much larger splash made by the circulation of popular culture.

As Lucy Bland notes, many decried the impact of popular culture and grew alarmed about people's engagement with books on the topics of love, romance, and sex; supposedly, popular literature pandered to women who sought cheap thrills.[17] This project takes the idea of impact a step further, past the circulation of narratives in the press, past social reactions to the spread of popular culture, and into the circulation of narratives in people's own responsive iterations. In doing so, this project follows along the lines suggested by Regina Kunzel that "popular texts provide cultural resources" for people's stories of themselves.[18] As Kunzel shows, readers appropriated and remade narratives published in popular culture to speak to their own experiences. Because popular culture gave people a language and a model for their own stories, representations and experience remain inextricably linked.[19]

To make this case, this project starts with the circulation of texts to consider how people consumed writings about sexuality. The generation reaching adulthood in the 1920s and 1930s read at a remarkable rate. As Q. D. Leavis famously wrote in 1923, "In twentieth-century England not only every one can read, but it is safe to add that every one does read."[20] During the period, a profusion of materials fed any number of appetites. Highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow books circulated, though as the intellectuals and their allies complained, the lowbrow circulated with an alarming velocity that kept libraries afloat.[21] People met their needs, even their intimate needs, through reading. It is no accident that Marie Stopes's *Married Love* sold two thousand copies within a fortnight of its publication in 1918. Magazines, popular fiction, sexology, and popular science all circulated through British society, creating a reservoir of ideas, metaphors, and narratives about sexuality and gender that allowed people to make sense of the world.

Despite the proliferation of published works, some sorts of information were harder to find than others. Laura Doan suggests that even those who actively looked for information about sexuality often had a hard time finding it.[22] These limitations look particularly true for the area of sexual science. It took years for Freud's first thousand copies of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* to sell. In contrast, *London Life*, a newsstand magazine, sold tens of thousands of copies a week. While Freud's model might have had a greater impact on a theory of fetishism over the whole of the twentieth century, readers of *London Life* had illustrations of the latest rubber garments and descriptions of how to wear them. To consider the issue of impact, this project starts with the circulation of popular science, sexology, novels, magazines, and ephemera. Chapter 1, "Reading Matters," details distribution mechanisms for sexual materials during the interwar years to consider the question of who read what when. However, the consideration of distribution is just the first step toward understanding how people read.

Even if individuals looked for sexual information and found it, they still needed to make sense of it. How readers read and understand the written word is no simple matter. Current reader-response studies examine how people read through some combination of questionnaires and intensive interviews. In contrast, historical reader-response studies must make use of the evidence that earlier generations of readers left behind. Jonathan Rose, for example, looks at the reception of classic works such as the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* to see how workers read and understood them. He provides evidence that historians can go beyond discourse analysis into reader reception through the use of archival documents and memoirs.[23] However, few sources document reading about sexuality, let alone provide evidence to consider how people make use of ideas about sexuality and gender to build identities. There are all sorts of reading about sexuality: Reading is no straightforward process, as Clarissa Smith, the one scholar who has done a reader-response analysis of pornography, has demonstrated.[24]

The question of how people read sexual materials and how their reading affected the self and others remains freighted, given the vehemence and destruction of the so-called porn wars of the 1980s. During that moment, antipornography feminists in the United States and to a lesser degree in the United Kingdom tried to redefine pornography as works that subjugate and degrade women. In doing so, they articulated a position that pornography taught men how to treat women like objects. This position posited a straightforward relationship between reading practices and actions. However, the process of reading and the results of reading seem like two different issues that each deserve their own analysis. There are really two questions embedded here: How do people understand what they read? How does what they read affect them? These questions are both interesting but only tangentially related. Furthermore, neither is as straightforward as it first appears. People can be stupid or lazy readers. They can also subconsciously or consciously focus on certain aspects of a text and ignore others. For example, although Marie Stopes's book *Married Love* was embedded with ideas about who should and should not procreate—she suggested in no uncertain terms that only the fit, healthy, and wholesome should copulate and procreate—people wrote her about marital passion and the desire to have children despite having syphilis and consumption, clear dysgenic disasters. They ignored pieces of her message and emphasized others. This sort of example suggests that the process of reading deserves examination in order to say how people understood and made use of texts.

Then there is the question of how texts affected the reader. Instead of assuming that sexual narratives acted on people in some sort of straightforward way, this project considers how people reacted to narratives. One of the ways it does so is by analyzing how people created their own stories in response to the narratives they read. The comparison between Marie Stopes's best seller, *Modern Love*, and her readers' responses illustrates the ways that they reacted to her ideas. These reactions often speak to something multidirectional; instead of a one-way relationship in which people read Stopes and adopted her ideas,

they discarded part of the message, emphasized certain bits, reinvented other pieces, and then reinvented themselves in relation to what they thought they understood. In other words, people rewrote and reinvented sexual ideas as they circulated through society to create new narratives of self.

The recognition of narrativity has been central to the profession of history for a generation and has allowed new and radically different readings of documents. The understanding that people shove their stories into a preexisting narrative framework has allowed for a reinterpretation of the sorts of work that happened in the courts, such as when individuals needed to make themselves explicable to the state; such an emphasis on narrativity has brought historians beyond the reflex to find the truth in the archives and has encouraged us to see that archival documents make use of narrative strategies. The next stage of considering narrativity is shifting the locus to consider not the truth or falsity of these claims but the sorts of work that narrativity does for a sense of self.

Narrative and narrativity have become important in psychological theory to conceptualize self-identity. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist, provides a working definition of the relationship of narrative and identity that deserves attention: "Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives—we are each of us unique."[25] Sacks sees the story of self as central to the functioning of personality. Without a narrative, people lose their ability to function in the world and, even more important for Sacks, lose the spark of individual identity. This sense of the connection between narrative and identity has been further developed by Marya Schechtman, who uses narrative self-constitution to define personhood: "At the core in this view is the assertion that individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs."[26] Schechtman links this narrative self-constitution with identity formation. It is through the story of self that the self is made.

The idea that we create our sense of self through our stories has limits, according to philosophers. What happens when we age and our stories radically change? Are we the same person if we have forgotten the stories of self that we developed as children? What about self-deceptions in our storytelling? Do the stories we tell get to the truth of self? Galen Strawson believes that such storytelling "almost always does more harm than good—that the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature. It's well known that telling and retelling one's past leads to changes, smoothings, enhancements, shifts away from facts."[27] Strawson believes that the self exists beyond coherent narrative, and I suspect he may be right that there is self beyond identity.

However, the philosopher's objection becomes the historian's objective. Despite Strawson's belief that this telling and retelling creates a problem to knowing oneself, it is just this telling and retelling that becomes central to identity formation in a historical sense. As a historian, rather than a philosopher or a psychologist, I am less concerned that the stories people tell get them to an unchanging truth than the fact that they tell particular stories about themselves at particular moments in time. The truth of those stories seems historically specific in a way that both philosophers and psychologists would find insupportable. If the truth of self can be historically flexible according to current tenets of identity formation, then the problem of identity can be shown to be historically constructed and delimited. Social class dominated the way that people categorized each other and themselves in the nineteenth century; sexual identity dominated in the twentieth century. A man might define himself as a worker in the nineteenth century but a heterosexual in the twentieth. Showing the way that these systems of classification were constituted and the ways that people made use of those systems seems like a historically more relevant concern than distinguishing the truth of people's claims.

This distance between subjectivity and narrativity is the most tantalizing feature of them. When a woman wrote about finding perfect union with her husband but in the next sentence suggested that he was impotent, the historian is given a choice about truth. Do we privilege the first statement about perfection or emphasize the second about failure? Do we focus on the mind or body? Or do we try to find some sort of way to square the two such that they both may be equally true but perhaps suggest that the lack of union met her needs? When a man wrote about being a "loving mother" to his nonexistent children, do we stress his delusions as "mother," or do we privilege his self-construction as "female?" If historians believe in a singular truth, these sorts of claims create a dissonance that insists on winnowing facts from fictions. However, a focus on self-narration and identity suggests an alternative. Understanding these stories as self-narratives allows for an exploration of them as the necessary projections that measure the distance between what was and what writers wanted to be. It is that distance that allowed new forms of identity to emerge. The fantastical mattered acutely during this time of great flux because it created room for people to conceptualize themselves in new ways. Self-delusion was a necessary precondition for self-creation.

These stories of self, for all the urgency of their tellings, remain radically indeterminate. People described themselves and their desires at great length, but few defined themselves according to current definitions of sexual identity or even according to contemporary labels. They occasionally called themselves "queer" or "odd," sometimes labeled their desires as "kinky," but rarely called themselves heterosexuals, homosexuals, straight, gay, sadists, masochists, or voyeurs. Instead, they told complicated stories that remain irreducible.

Queer scholars including Laura Doan, Matt Cook, H. G. Cocks, and Matt Houlbrook have explored the permutations of queer desire before a consolidation

of modern gay and lesbian identities. They have charted queer existence in ways that emphasize temporal and geographic variation, and their accounts stress the ways that individuals built a sense of themselves from a variety of cultural and social meanings.[28] Harry Cocks, in his analysis of nineteenth-century London, describes a historical sense of selfhood that remains irreducible to acts or identities. Matt Cook has extended the examination of London forward to the late nineteenth century. As he describes it, London simultaneously functioned as an indecent city, an inverted city, a decadent city, and a Hellenic city. Matt Houlbrook looks to London between the end of the Great War and the publication of the Wolfenden Report as a place that supported "homosex" without necessitating homosexual identities. And Laura Doan has explored sapphic fashioning against and around the emergence of legal and medical wrangling around lesbianism. The dynamic relationships between social meanings, individual experiences, and discourse made meanings not only multiple but multiplying.

If, as these scholars have suggested, individuals in the past saw themselves not as gay or straight, not as committing acts or articulating identities but as telling stories that were labile stories of desire, then the categories of sexual desire can be far wider than currently examined. The exploration of such stories of desire would demand extending the terrain of queer beyond same-sex desire to include a much wider range of longings. That extension of queer would make sense if, as David Halperin suggests, "the prominence of heterosexuality and homosexuality as central, organizing categories of thought, behavior, and erotic subjectivity" remains recent.[29]

During the interwar years, the profusion of erotic desires did not fit within the organizing principles of homosexual or heterosexual. Consider a case of a man who dressed as a woman for its many humiliating pleasures. (The novel *Gynecocracy* [1893] details this sort of character in great psychological depth.) In trying to make sense of such a person, one could consider various sexological categories such as invert, transsexual, transvestite, or masochist. If—rather than spelunking the past for characteristics that speak to identities as we understand them now—we see these states as amorphous and overlapping with no clear line demarcating them, then we can see the ways that telling stories about sameness and difference allowed individuals to articulate themselves. Rather than deciding which identity fits better, one can focus on the story itself.[30] As storytelling itself becomes the focus of the study, tautological trajectories melt away.

And as they do, the clear demarcations that have separated historians of sexuality from scholars of queer studies also diminish. Historians of sexuality have been documenting a broad array of sexual acts and arrangements for a generation.[31] Historians, particularly social historians, have combed the archives and used the sources to reconstruct a diversity of patterns based on lived experience.[32] They have found a wide range of sexual behaviors, models, and ideas, and they have considered a wide range of sex acts. Though queer scholars have chastised historians for choosing archival strength over theoretical

sophistication and for a desire to understand the making of the present, historians have found and documented a diversity of patterns and behaviors; they have looked for and found evidence in which masses of subjects testify to their desires. Bringing empirical evidence to the table is no small matter because of the elusiveness of understanding sexual behavior in the past. According to Matt Houlbrook, the inability to know about sex acts in the past comes from the problematic nature of the historical record itself.[33] The examination of behaviors that extend the range of "queer" calls for the merger of archival strength and theoretical vision. If queer theory applies to more than same-sex relations, then it should illuminate a range of relationships including married love, kink, cross-dressing, and whipping.[34] Archival holdings that document the desires of a broad range of people should be open to queer readings. This project demonstrates the overlooked richness of the archival record and extends the sorts of stories that the record tells.

Three sorts of sources form the backbone of this project. Letters to Marie Stopes provide one set of documents. At the end of *Married Love*, Stopes asked for data regarding women's sexual cycles of arousal; thousands of people wrote to her in response. These letters form a remarkable testimony to the ways that men and women explained themselves, their relationships, and their sexual problems during the interwar years. A second group of sources comes from the Public Records Office (PRO) of the National Archives and was entered into the evidence for court cases and as part of government testimony. For example, one man wrote dozens of obscene letters about his desire to whip girls. These letters were collected as part of the police case against him. The police file ran to hundreds of pages. Concomitantly, hundreds of administrators, doctors, governmental officials, and concerned individuals wrote letters, memos, and position papers about whether corporal whipping overlapped with sexual whipping in the Home Office and Colonial Office files. All of these materials spoke to the meanings of whipping at that moment. A third set of materials comes from magazines such as *Bits of Fun* and *London Life*, which published correspondence from its readers. The innumerable letters about rubber wear, stockings, corsets, piercings, tattoos, girl boxing and wrestling, amputees, and more attest to people's diversity of desires.[35] These three sets of sources add up to tens of thousands of stories that people told about themselves and each other. As a group, these letters allow us to make sense of how people saw themselves as sexual beings and how they wrote stories in which they could star. In some sense, these sources answer the logistical problem of how the audience for writings about sex responded. They detail what individuals took away from what they read. They form a sort of reader response to questions that individuals were never asked.

Nonetheless, letters as sources have problems. They are fragmentary, offering little of the depth or breadth of more accomplished memoirs. One cannot learn about a writer by comparing the changes in thinking over time or by comparing passages on a particular topic. Instead, one needs to judge the

writer by a series of snippets or by a single snippet in time. Letters are written as mediation between self and other and often organize their accounts for a specific reason. Writers use the conventions of their genre and condense their stories to fit in a few short pages. They are written from a person to another and mediate all the markers of social difference. They organize a life into a coherent framework. They are linear products that flatten life into simple patterns. In all sorts of ways, they are not unmediated self-expressions. Further, there are no guarantees about veracity; sometimes these letters provide a fantasy about what the writer wanted rather than a description about how the writer lived—a problem particularly relevant to accounts of sexuality. The adaption of certain motifs could happen consciously or subconsciously, in a straightforward manner or in a manner more twisted and interesting.

This element of strangeness has allowed historians to write off some of the letter writers used in this book as marginal. However, the qualities that they embodied are less marginal than they first appear because the questions that they considered—including the meaning of sexual unions, the erotics of gender, the problems of corporal punishment, and the impact of consumer pleasures—affected everyone, even if everyone did not follow the same logic or come to the same conclusions. Further, such letter writers are not marginal in terms of numbers. Though part of this project builds on the case file of a single man, for example, that man noted roughly two dozen associates in his address book, and his account correlated with a thousand stories in the ephemeral press. Such magazines were printed in the tens of thousands, and those magazines would be passed from person to person weekly and read by the hundreds of thousands. A case study of one may be marginal, but as those voices add up, their marginality begins to raise questions about the center. The mass of British society struggled with similar issues to these sources as they reacted to the changing character of their world.

This book focuses on the interwar years because it is only during those years that people began to write about sex in mass numbers. In other words, the project simply follows the sources. However, the sources emerged in a specific context, and the historical period between the wars therefore becomes critical to understanding how people came to construct their sexual stories. A particular set of circumstances emerged after the Great War that made letter writing possible, that made sexual lives more fraught, and that encouraged people to tell stories in new ways. The war transformed life in myriad ways, making change possible. The broad realization of changed circumstances after the war demanded the development of new expectations and roles for men and women.[36] New social circumstances began to demand new models of understanding. The repercussions from the Great War continued to affect the populace and mark their lives until the next war swept it away as the defining moment of their times.

During the war, soldiers and civilians began writing letters in astonishing numbers. The Army Post Office saw an increase in the number of letters sent,

from 650,000 letters per week in 1914 to 3 million per week in early 1915. By 1916, more than 11 million letters were sent to the troops per week.[37] The war multiplied the culture of letter writing and encouraged people, who had no reason to write letters before the war, suddenly to begin.

Change from the war affected people on a mass scale. Some five million British men, or 22 percent of men, served during the war.[38] More men came from the empire and dominions; Canada and Australia, for instance, had a higher proportion of men in military service than England.[39] The Great War passed a far longer shadow across Britain than in the United States. The war dead numbered 722,000 in the United Kingdom, while in the United States fewer than 120,000 died despite a population more than twice the size. The impact rose accordingly. Virtually every person in Britain saw someone—whether a relative, friend, colleague, lover, spouse, or companion—wrenched out of daily life and sent into service. As a result, daily life on the home fronts suffered from deep disturbances, and soldiers experienced disruptions on a mass scale. Most men and women experienced change in acknowledged and unacknowledged ways.

Men came back from the war changed and sometimes broken. They suffered from impotence, from debilitating pain that affected their sexual function, aroused by strange desires according to their own accounts.[40] Men returned longing for softness, from either women or the clothes that generated memories of women. Prewar gender roles stressed masculinity as virile, rugged, aggressive, and self-contained.[41] The idealization of sacrifice and heroism in adventure stories and poetry encouraged men to volunteer for service in the war but did not prepare men to withstand the horrors of trench warfare.[42] Soldiers experienced mental and psychological trauma in unprecedented numbers. Masculine models of strength and self-control crumbled, and men's will gave way to crippling emotional and mental disorders.[43] Other men rejected models of masculinity and instead valued femininity, especially mothering, welcoming a return to domesticity at the end of the war.[44] Finally, the war had enormous consequences on men's sense of themselves as men and on their ideas of sexuality.[45] As one Lancashire woman wrote in 1926, "Men are so funny these days, since the war, they certainly haven't been the same."[46] She looked for tips on how to keep her husband sexually interested—a problem for which she and her female friends could find no solution.

Women were met with a rising consumer culture that whetted their desires and a society that denounced them for their engagement with those desires at every turn. Commentators blamed women for the inability to return to prewar life and suggested that women's gains came at the expense of men's losses.[47] Women outnumbered men by almost two million after the war, though these numbers were routinely discussed and embellished. Counted among the remaining men were the wounded and maimed who could not resume normal life.[48] In fact, women's gains were often illusionary.[49] Though women made some progress toward equality, including achieving full suffrage in 1928, social

and economic inequality between men and women continued and even grew at war's end when women were forced from their jobs as men demobilized.[50] Society focused on the young single girl as a locus of social disorder, and women became a focus for contempt, bitterness, and aggression. There would be few eras when derision and desire so intertwined around a central icon. Supposedly struck with "khaki fever" during hostilities, the young single woman was thought to embody the excesses of the postwar world.[51] Hedonistic, pleasure-seeking boyettes or flappers smoked, drank cocktails, and engaged in sordid love affairs. They were promiscuous, fashion fixated, boyish, and independent; they were unsettled and unformed. They were not even serious enough to be feminists; instead, they embodied sexual frivolity.[52] Anger at them became a way to explicate anger at the changed world. This picture of pained social relations between men and women created a deep reservoir of gender ideas and behaviors for erotic consideration.

The results of the war lingered after the armistice. The landscape of the postwar world remained littered with people who had experienced amputation and trauma.[53] The horrors of trench warfare affected men with fits, faints, paralysis, convulsions, tics, tremors, mutism, hallucinations, and nightmares for decades.[54] Men and women emerged from the war with new tactile and sensory experiences and new needs, sexual and otherwise, that they expressed. Those who could not cope with the return to civilian life were locked in mental asylums across Europe.[55] And those who could work through such experiences flooded the cinemas, the publishing houses, and the art houses with their efforts. Thus, the war as an experience, as a memory, and as a fragment of cultural expression marked the interwar years and contributed to the sorts of stories people told about themselves.

The war changed the tenor of their storytelling. People no longer saw their world as strictly rational or logical, and the methods they used to decipher themselves and the world around them rested on longings and will as much as reason and measure. Modris Eksteins argues that the twentieth century has been essentially ahistorical because "this century has been one of dis-integration rather than integration. The psychologist has, as a result, been more in demand than the historian. And the artist has received more respect than either."[56] Slow and careful reasoning no longer provided the model for understanding the world; instead, dynamism and illegibility became the model for the modern age. New models for writing and representation emerged. The tone of their stories of self changed as well.[57] Paul Fussell's examination of the impact of the war on literature found that the experience of war engendered a deep sense of irony and despair.[58] Modernists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf captured stream of consciousness through experimentation in form and structure. Among writers less skilled and polished than Joyce, attempts to speak a truth about sexual subjectivity took a variety of forms. In some cases, sex and aggression exploded onto the page in a hash of words. In others, the

form of the carefully wrought case study allowed individuals to organize their accounts. People told new stories and used new methods to tell them.

All of these ideas affected people's sense of themselves and became fodder for people's sexual scripting. Rapid changes during the war years allowed them to rewrite the stories they told. World War I did not start all of these transformations; nor did the war cause them. Instead, the war and its resultant traumas effected change and then marked out the process of change in people's lives. People rewrote their ideas about women and men, marriage, trauma, sex, the future, and the past, not once but repeatedly, sometimes compulsively returning again and again to these fraught concepts until the next great war remade the conceptual world again. They wrote their sexual subjectivity in relationship to these concepts continuously until once-relevant constellations of ideas seemed antiquated, and then those antiquated ideas seemed nostalgic. And then they eroticized that nostalgia.

The moment of people's writing, between the wars, is thus central to this account. The legacy of the war, the ascendence of consumer culture, the habit of writing letters, the enormous conceptual problems regarding sex and gender, the broad social reorganizations that took place, and the popularization of sexual science all contributed to people's sexual stories and all crystallized during this short period. There was no single cause of change or a single change to follow; instead there was a rapid cascade of transformations that affected a wide variety of people. The period saw the shift from industrial culture to a widespread consumer culture replete with ready-made goods, paraphernalia that advertised and celebrated them, and a growing service economy that dealt in them. The period contributed to the development of modernism as a form of expression and as a set of ideas and allowed for the consolidation of modern gender and sexual identities. As Lucy Bland notes, the issues of "crucial importance" after the war included the "adjustment to a postwar economy; blurring of class boundaries; ambivalences towards the spread of mass culture, including the spread of the popular press; and above all, deep anxiety about gender roles and the modern woman."[59] None of these transformations happened easily, and all of them had long-term repercussions for British society and modern sexual relations.

If the chronological markers condense rapid change into a few short years, the geographic limits of this process expand its boundaries exponentially. People wrote their accounts from within an empire that was at once a geographical expression and a conceptual world.[60] Though often forgotten given the rapidity with which it dissolved after World War II, the British Empire reached its apex during the interwar years. It yoked together roughly one quarter of the world's population and controlled roughly a quarter of the earth's total mass. Even the most committed critics at that moment saw it as robust.[61] Ideals of what it meant to be British had salience on people's constructions of themselves, even as groups within the empire continuously reconstructed what that

might mean.[62] People constructed the self and the other as part of a process of "mutual constitution" organized, according to Catherine Hall, by "grammars of difference."[63] People wrote themselves according to logics presented in consumer culture with the dominions as a location of a white-settler society full of fit yeoman farmers, the Indian empire as a hierarchy of castes and religions, and the broader empire as featuring a range of exotic peoples and practices.[64] When Laurence Lenton, a Fulham corset maker, sent a photograph of "A Tight-Belted Maori" for publication in the correspondence column of a popular magazine, he not only communicated with other readers about fetish wear; he also let other readers map sexuality onto regions of the empire.[65] He defined himself and others according to "grammars of difference" marked by race and empire.

Individuals across the empire experienced an overlapping consumer culture reinforced by popular culture and advertising. Imperialism pervaded life in the United Kingdom, though often in ways that people never noted. They read and responded to novels that featured an imperial background—whether explicitly, like Margaret Pedler's stories, set in British India, or implicitly, like Sax Rohmer's stories of Dr. Fu Manchu. They used and eroticized imperial products such as rubberized rain gear, and they moved back and forth from England to empire as part of a continuous conceptual world. Reading let people map erotic pleasures onto a variety of geographies. Artifacts and ideas flowed along the lines of the empire; books and ephemera published in London passed to the rest of Britain and onto the dominions and empire, bringing with them conceptions about sexuality that contributed to ideas of race and identity.[66] Marie Stopes's writings about the creation of a fit and healthy race spread to South Africa, Australia, and Canada, and readers in those locales and others saw themselves as sharing a cultural identity. As one couple explained to Stopes, "I suppose to other folk we are a very ordinary pair—but it is something very wonderful in our hearts towards each other."[67] In many ways, the couple was both ordinary and emblematic of a shared set of values and beliefs. Their common conceptual world connected discussions about the importance of fresh air and orgasms from South Africa to England.[68] Shared material goods, patterns of reading, concerns, experiences, and mental practices knit together a common culture across vast distances. Though the ubiquity of imperial ideas and products did not make all Britons imperialists, it contributed to a culture of imperialism that pervaded daily life and common experience.

When the British traveled across the empire, they turned to the London publishing world to stay abreast of culture. Across the empire, popular culture linked modes of thought with the mechanism of the state. Consumers received their magazines though a centralized, organized, and highly efficient system of moving popular culture that included publishers, wholesalers, and agents and that made use of the latest technologies, including ships, boats, rails, and eventually airplanes to deliver information in a continuous stream. Sexually explicit literature appeared in urban areas in South Africa, popular science appeared in Canada, glamour magazines traveled to Australia. Popular books, legal magazines, and

even the occasional obscene work followed the spread of consumer culture across the dominions and colonies. There was not one single set of ideas but multiplying, overlapping ideas communicated through a variety of mediums, transmitted inward to the self and outward to others across the empire at the same time.

The consumption of such ideas allowed people to link sexuality with biopolitics.[69] Men and women remade themselves and each other as emblems of the imperial order. The leader of the physical culture movement, Eugen Sandow, promoted bodily perfection as a way to promote cultural regeneration across the empire. His idea of bodily strength and beauty linked 100,000 members of the Health and Strength League by 1931.[70] Magazines such as *Health and Efficiency* and *Health and Strength*, which encouraged this self-fashioning and self-regulation, affected people across the empire. Further, incitements overlapped with discipline in the spread of censorship codes and corporal punishment. Consumers in England and the empire read erotic descriptions of corporal punishment while members of the Foreign Office communicated with local administrators in Africa about the use of corporal punishment for sex crimes. The whip linked sex to the state, illustrating the often covert ways that biopolitics of the empire ramified through the population. By reading the same authors, by writing to each other, by following legal codes derived from the same set of laws, and by breaking legal codes resulting in the same sets of punishments applied to their persons, Britons reconstituted the empire on themselves in sexual terms.

To understand the material culture that formed the basis of their conceptual and cultural world, Chapter 1 considers how writings about sexuality circulated in the interwar world. The chapter details the distribution patterns for magazines, novels, and sexology and examines the specific constraints that affected access to those ideas. The chapter also considers what sorts of ideas circulated in the interwar world, paving the way for the subsequent examination of how people used those ideas in the construction of their sexual stories. The book then follows an overlapping chronology to examine stories about married love, fetishism, cross-dressing, and whipping. Central to each chapter is the consideration of the ways that published materials circulated and the ways that people responded with their own stories of self.

Chapter 2, "Reading *Married Love*," examines the correspondence sent to Marie Stopes after she published her best-selling marriage manual in 1918. It considers how men and women wrote their own stories in response to her book. It asks: How did readers of Stopes's works describe themselves? How did they plot their own stories of love and sexual longing? How did they adopt her vocabulary and adapt her ideas about race, marriage, and sexual satisfaction to their own needs? The comparison between Stopes's prose and readers' responses illustrates the ways that individuals rewrote themselves after the Great War to embody a future defined by health and marital happiness.

Chapter 3, "Fashioning Fetishism from the Pages of *London Life*," examines correspondence columns that ran from 1923 until 1941 in a popular magazine to see how people created their own sense of queer sexuality in the interwar

years. The chapter considers the tens of thousands of letters about corsets, amputees, piercing, high heels, water play, tattoos, girl boxing and wrestling, tight gloves, and long hair to examine how people scripted their own desires. In considering how popular culture opened room for people to write queer narratives of desire, the chapter explores the ways that historical transformations created ruptures that played out in sexual and gender transformations.

Chapter 4, "Mr. Hyde and the Cross-Dressing Kink," considers the relationship between the circulation of ideas in the popular press and people's lived experiences. Building on the previous chapter, which looked at the letters from a correspondence column, the chapter ties the distribution of magazines to an identifiable person and his community. Mr. Hyde bought the same magazines and materials and then lived what others wrote. By exploring interwar ideas of male cross-dressing, the chapter demonstrates the ways that cross-dressing responded to the gender and sexual anxieties that emerged in the wake of the Great War before cross-dressing had been dissected into sexological taxonomies.

Chapter 5, "Whipping Stories in the Pages of the PRO," considers the ways that the circulation of stories transformed state policy. It juxtaposes the close study of an obscene-letter writer who accused local girls of all sorts of perverse acts and demanded that their parents whip and cane them, acts described in pornographic detail, with the consideration of officials in the Home Office and Colonial Office who tabulated, assessed, and examined the state's practice of whipping prisoners, largely for sex crimes. Reformers denounced whipping as a sort of state-sanctioned perversion and by 1938 convinced members of the British government that whipping resulted in a range of sexual desires including sadism, masochism, and sexual inversion. The broad assessment of whipping as contributing to sex run amok forced the British state into recognizing the preexisting perversion of its own acts and resulted in changing policies toward corporal punishment.

The progression of chapters does not imply a straightforward linear model, whether along a spectrum of loving to aberrant, liberation to repression, or margins to center. All of the sexual beliefs and desires in this book have been presented as perversions, and all of them embodied a longing for love and completion. Instead of linearity or simple binaries, this volume suggests that people experienced a chaotic mix of emotions, engaged in myriad relationships, and viewed themselves and each other in multiple and often contradictory ways. Each chapter follows the circulation of ideas and details an aspect of the various relationships between production, distribution, and consumption. Most important, each chapter details the impact of reading and writing on the narrative construction of self. People searched for explanations and entertainment, bought materials, read them, and responded with stories of their own. In the process, they wrote a future and struggled to lever themselves away from their own conception of history. Caught between a past from which they were trying to awaken and a modernity of their imagination, people felt electrified by possibilities.