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# Transatlantic intimacies: The homoerotic affect worlds of nineteenth-century print culture

Melissa R. Pompili

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Transatlantic Intimacies: The Homoerotic Affect Worlds of Nineteenth-Century Print Culture

by

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Thesis

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Thesis Committee:

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my unconditionally supportive and loving parents, Sue and Ray.

And also to *my* intimate public: Susan, Charish, Nate, Avneet, and Marci. Without all of your love, support, humor, and invaluable feedback, this project would have felt insurmountable.

In the immortal and (surely) timeless words of The Beach Boys, "God only knows what I'd be without you."

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## Abstract

The thesis argues that during the late-nineteenth century, an alternative means of same-sex erotic communication was conceived of in transatlantically published American and British *künstlerroman* novels written by female authors. This alternative discourse was communicated affectively to initiated readers by way of metaphorical descriptions of painting, music, accompanying illustrations, and photography, and these novels all participate in the work of moving non-normative sexuality into the public sphere at the turn of the century. Through readings of works by Kate Chopin, Julia Magruder, and Amy Levy, the thesis explores the ways that these affective interactions were constructed, and the manner in which they hailed implied readers into an intimate public with one another. Ultimately, these novels offer a type of guide for members of the initiated intimate public that functioned as a signpost on the path that led to queer performativity as a way of life in the twentieth century.

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## Introduction: Textual Intimacy at the Fin de Siècle

A book had gone the rounds of the *pension*. When it came [Edna's] turn to read it, she did so with profound astonishment. She felt moved to read the book in secret and solitude, though none of the others had done so – to hide it from view at the sound of approaching footsteps.

-Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*.

The fin de siècle was a time of cultural upheaval and sexual revolution on both sides of the Atlantic. As Elaine Showalter points out, the end of the century saw the first use of the words “feminism” and “homosexuality,” and these words were born out of a time when social woes were tied to sexual revolution in the cultural imagination (*Sexual Anarchy* 2-5). As Foucault argues, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, homosexuality was beginning to be understood as a category of identity rather than simply a sex act that could be separated from a person's sense of being in the world. Sexologists such as Kraft-Ebbing delineated the ways that homosexuals displayed supposedly observable aberrant behaviors that characterized them as perverse, and these behaviors played a role in solidifying the cultural conception of performative identity based on sexual object choice. This transition from isolated action to personal identity was fraught with turmoil in the public sphere, and discourses of sexuality were brought into the domestic sphere through the periodical presses and newspapers. The Cleveland Street case and the trials of Oscar Wilde brought homosexuality into public view in a way that legally condemned non-normative sexuality, and there were an ever-increasing number of newspaper editorials written about the role of sex and sexuality within art and literature. While it has been argued that *homosexuality* was beginning to solidify in the cultural imagination at this point in history, it is worth noting that *heterosexuality* was also undergoing alterations that would change its presentation because it

was beginning to be defined in negation to homosexuality. This thesis argues that while these newly forming concepts simultaneously intertwined and diverged, the aesthetic realm became a site where these competing discourses could be examined, debated, and integrated into the wider culture through representations of difference. In these representations, readers could affectively engage in the work of questioning and solidifying their own sexual identity. Within these aesthetic sites, sexuality began to be experimented with metaphorically by authors for a community of similarly inclined readers, and these readers were able to find a space of solidarity within a culture that was increasingly homophobic and distrustful of ambiguous sexuality. The notion that reading creates a community of like-minded individuals is so widely accepted that the idea seems commonplace in many ways. But it is important to critically account for the way that these communities are formed in the first place as well. Through an inspection of several novels written by Kate Chopin, Julia Magruder, and Amy Levy at the end of the nineteenth century (1888-1898), I will delineate the ways in which these texts worked to create an intimate public of potentially queer readers that found solace in aesthetic representations of non-normative identities.

I use "queer" in the broadest sense of the term in this project in the hopes of resisting the urge to historically "identify" closeted homosexuals during the period. This type of categorization relegates these authors and protagonists to a type of victimhood, suggesting that if it weren't for the constraints of the larger society these women may have been free to express their *true* desires. I do not mean to suggest that these women were not operating under considerable social constraints – they undoubtedly were. But I would like to suggest that none of the female protagonists that this study centers on can be easily described as either homosexual or heterosexual: these women all fall somewhere in between, and perhaps

that is precisely the point. Rather than identifying *protolesbian* women who were on the path to modern conceptions of lesbian identity like Kathryn R. Kent does in *Making Girls into Women*, I would like to critically engage with these women on their own terms. These authors and protagonists are all active and conscious participants in their own sexual experimentation, yet they do not seem to suggest that erotic intimacy between women was incompatible with heterosexual marriage, with Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier (fittingly) as the one exception. Queer theory itself is defined by exposing and embracing porous, non-normative sexualities, yet much queer literary theory still reinscribes a quite rigid view of objects of desire. We are still quite comfortable with our binaries of homosexual and heterosexual in many ways. Now that many queer theories have recently moved away from the limiting focus on sexual acts as the sole signifier of queer identity – such as queer temporalities, the turn toward a queer Biopolitics, and the recent engagement with social theories of affect – I would like to shift my focus from privileging physical sex acts to an erotic engagement that is neither grounded in the physical body nor relegated to spiritualized metaphor. Affective, erotic encounters occur in these texts not only through touch but through seeing, hearing, and emotive connection, and it is this murky, affective connection which makes these encounters both possible and visible.

The cultural connection between image and recognition of identity was beginning to solidify during the nineteenth century as well. Nancy Armstrong claims that "pictures began to speak louder than words" in the mid-nineteenth century, and there is no doubt that this orientation toward image contributed to the rise of modernism in the twentieth century. This cultural turn toward image-based fiction contributed to the rise of realism in England and America (6). Transatlantically, realism and aestheticism became the literary modes of

preference for authors who wished to convey visual information to a mass-market audience. I would like to suggest that a small, seemingly unconnected group of female authors who began to experiment with non-normative sexualities and social relations in fiction during this period turned to a now little-known subgenre called the *künstlerroman* novel. The *künstlerroman*, a variation on the *bildungsroman*, is a type of narrative that could be most accurately described as an artist coming-of-age novel. Notable examples of this type of novel include highly lauded works such as James Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (a deliberate "inversion" of the genre), and the heartbreaking and arguably most famous lesbian novel, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Typically in these novels, the artist struggles against social mores in the development of their own moral character and artistic proficiency. This framework was so popular with New Women writers of the late nineteenth century that some critics have identified the *künstlerroman* as "the quintessential New Woman narrative" (Heller 143). I would argue that this type of novel in itself created a culturally queer space that was situated somewhere between the popular works of realism and aestheticism of the day. Within this narrative framework, female authors utilized the cultural orientation toward image in order to communicate with like-minded or curious readers, and this affective bond offered female-identified readers a space to experiment with risky objects of desire in a manner that would not alienate them from society or from their normative attachments. In this space, female authors of the time created a queer, intimate public of readers who could test the viability of these non-normative desires and modes of living, and in the process, cultural revolution was able to take root within the domestic sphere in a space of relative safety from social persecution. By communicating

through coded aesthetic metaphors using image, music, and photographic imagery in women's sentimental culture, authors could reach female readers in a literary space that was devalued and mostly ignored by those in positions of power in the patriarchal culture. Furthermore, textual representations of sexually non-normative female artists offered these authors an already culturally deviant subject on which to project these fantasies, and gave their readers a space where they could find “communion” with a group of like-minded readers in order to find ideological connection in their ever more solitary existence (Silverman 2).

Most critical discussion of homosexuality in the *fin de siècle* concentrates on male same-sex desire. This is due in part to the legal proceedings which targeted homosexual men during the period, of course, but there is little doubt that in a patriarchal culture, the writing of men is deemed a more appropriate object of study – even today. It is worth noting that much of the discussion that does privilege female homoerotic desire during the period also predominantly concentrates on New Woman fiction and social ideology, which tackled female sexuality and liberation as a matter of course. Many critics, such as Sharon Marcus and Martha Vicinus, have worked to highlight the blurred boundaries of female friendship and homoerotic attraction during the nineteenth century. However, Sharon Marcus concentrates on an earlier Victorian period than the subjects of this study (1830 - 1880) in her discussion of female friendship as a central component of solidifying heterosexual marriage. And while Martha Vicinus tirelessly delineates the historical visibility of lesbian-identified women in the Victorian period, her analysis does not specifically address the women who may have felt that they were neither heterosexual nor homosexual but somewhere in between. I argue that during the end of the century there was a blurring of homosocial

relations and homoerotic desire that can be examined in women's novels from a wide range of literary modes, including aestheticism, realism, and sentimental women's culture.

My critical framework predominantly builds on Michael Warner's conception of publics and on Lauren Berlant's work on sentimental intimate publics in American culture during the nineteenth century. Warner claims that

To address a public or to think of oneself as belong to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain kind of normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology (10).

In short, in order to belong to a public, one must be able to access the space created for the community, and he or she must be able to find common ideological ground that would connect the members of said public. Warner's broad conception of what constitutes a "public" is quite productive, yet his transhistorical study concentrates quite heavily on Western political thought and social ideology, and there is little attention paid to women's culture in the nineteenth century. Berlant's *The Female Complaint* is a detailed portrait of sentimental women's culture in the nineteenth century, and her work highlights the subtle work of the ways that "commodified genres of intimacy" – such as mass-produced sentimental writings – function in building a national fantasy of citizenship (x). Berlant's conception of the social work of an intimate public is also incredibly valuable to my work. She claims that "This commodity world and the ideology of normative, generic-but-unique femininity trains women to expect to be recognizable by other members of this intimate public, even if they reject or feel ambivalent about its dominant terms," and this identification, despite the

presence of ideological ambivalence, is precisely what characterizes the novels that are the subject of this study (6). My readings in the following chapters are grounded in Berlant's theory of affective transmission between women of different backgrounds and circumstances, yet I would argue that these novels also contain a visible queer narrative that is made manifest to an initiated reader. This distinction somewhat challenges Berlant's conception that readers are able to identify in spite of the erasure of their own identity. Even though Berlant's theories do stand up to critical evaluation, the novels that are studied here do include a sublimated queer narrative within their pages that provides an anchor for non-normative subjects to form their own attachments. Furthermore, rather than concentrating solely on American culture, my study extends across the Atlantic to England as well, with the understanding that literary culture is not produced in a national vacuum. As Meredith McGill claims, due to the "tacit or explicit literary nationalism" that defines English departments and literary anthologies, there is a national divide in the scholarship of literature that produces a mostly ideological division that is not necessarily indicative of the cultural conditions at the end of the nineteenth century (2). While literary critics may identify themselves as American or British literary scholars due to personal interest, the structure of English departments, and the demands of undergraduate curriculums, mass-market women's literary culture at the fin de siècle was quite transatlantic in nature. The novels that I examine in this thesis were produced and marketed on both sides of the Atlantic, and they did not solely participate in the work of producing a national body of literature – they instead suggest a cosmopolitan discourse that was connected to New Woman ideology rather than the ideological construction of literary nationalism.

The novels that are studied within the confines of this thesis are written about women,

by women, and mainly for women. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is no doubt a high-art literary endeavor that was marketed to a gender-neutral audience, but Edna Pontellier's struggle with the social roles prescribed for women would undoubtedly speak to a female reader in a way that could have been (and possibly still is) somewhat inaccessible for a reader who was socialized as male. Julia Magruder's best-selling sentimental novels were marketed to young women who may have been interested in feminist ideals but who were not necessarily ready to consider themselves gender outlaws. And Amy Levy's novel *The Romance of a Shop* was marketed as a sentimental novel that she wrote for a popular audience, in contrast to her second and final novel, *Reuben Sachs*. Importantly, these novels also register in their stories the historical impossibility of living an openly queer life which Heather Love has termed a “crucial archive of feeling,” and within this archive one may see the palliative effects that creating art can have in a culture that was increasingly homophobic (4).

In Chapter One I delineate the way that these aesthetic metaphors are rendered visible in a queer reading of Edna Pontellier's character in *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin. Specifically, these interactions take place at the intersection of textual description and artistic production – such as painting or listening to music – which I term *aesthetic contact points*. These contact points reveal counternarratives within the novel that are structured by queer longings and desires. The aesthetic realm that is created within *The Awakening* is constructed as a female-centered homoerotic space where alternate means of arousal and erotic engagements are privileged to the same extent as physical sexual acts. Through an extended reading of what I argue is a queer aesthetic interaction between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, I attempt to tease a homoerotic reading out of a novel that is generally accepted as an

overtly heterosexual text. I will argue that *The Awakening* serves as an example of fiction that allows for affective identification and attachment between queer readers by way of a material product that can also be accessible to the dominant culture. As a result, even heteronormative fiction can provide an anchor for unnamed or unspoken desire for non-normative subjects.

In Chapter Two I will examine two novels by the critically long-neglected Virginia writer Julia Magruder: *The Princess Sonia* (1895) and *The Violet* (1896). The chapter argues that Magruder's novels are a site where readers are initiated into a queer intimate public through the combination of text and illustration. I will delineate the literary and visual techniques that are used to hail those readers into the intimate public, and examine the cultural conditions that encouraged this type of identification. Furthermore, I argue that Magruder and illustrator Charles Dana Gibson use the combination of text and image to explore the possibility of rethinking the structure of heterosexual marriage in the late-nineteenth century. This conceptual relation rests on the necessary infusion of intimate female friendship with normative marriage. Magruder and her fiction are participating in a culture of affective world-building that cannot be reduced simply to either a political argument for female emancipation or an example of the apolitical nature of sentimental women's culture. One necessarily includes the other in this affect world.

Finally, in Chapter Three I turn to Amy Levy's first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), in order to examine the ways in which imagery that is informed by photography and lighting cues can signal a queer narrative in an otherwise overtly heteronormative novel. This chapter will argue that much like a negative image of a photograph, the interplay of light and shadow become the signals that mark the aesthetic contact points of the novel. These images

are then developed into a coherent image that could be recognized by the members of the intimate public in their everyday lives in the public sphere. By aligning visual cues with homoerotic attraction, Levy's novel offers the intimate public a literary example of the power of their own artistic and potentially queer gaze. Through this representation, the normative performance of everyday queer life becomes a politically powerful site of representation that can be transferred to the real world.

This real-world expression is connected to the figure of the flâneur, and these women all do indeed stroll their way to agency within their respective cityscapes. Edna Pontellier establishes a sense of self in her strolls around New Orleans, Martha Keene and Sophia Rutledge take in the sights of Paris and solidify their intimate bond, and Gertrude Lorimer rides on the top of an omnibus in central London in order to get a better view of her fellow urban dwellers and surroundings. The female flâneur is typically read as a purveyor of urban life who exposes herself to the danger that can be found in a city environment. However, I would argue that these examples of female flâneurs actually work to cement queer performance as a socially productive possibility for the readers invested in this intimate public.

Rather than proceeding in a historically linear fashion, I have organized these chapters in reverse chronology, beginning with a reading of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and ending with an interpretation of Amy Levy's first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888). It is my aim to build on Foucault's account of "reverse" discourse in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault claims that dominated groups may take advantage of the reversibility of power by examining the discourses created and deployed by those in power – discourses of power not only reveal the methods of control but also reveal their undoing with each

utterance. By beginning with the almost total aestheticization of homoerotic desire between women in the fin de siècle and ending with the beginning of a new discourse of aesthetic textual intimacy, I will show the way this intimate public was created and altered under the pressures of external social mores and ideologies. But more importantly, it is my hope to show that women were instrumental in the creation of and the maintaining of this coded erotic discourse, and furthermore, that this discourse was created not just as a reaction to the rise of heteronormativity but also as an aesthetic resistance to heteronormative ideologies.

By reading in reverse chronology, we are able to see how these competing discourses are formed and how they may continue to be deployed by those who are marginalized. By utilizing the dominant literary strategies of the period – mainly realism and aestheticism – these women were able to carve out a safe space for themselves and their readers, affectively creating an intimate public that could be organized covertly within the public sphere. By ending this thesis with the creation of a new discourse, I would like to suggest that this discourse did not disappear at the beginning of the twentieth century and with Edna Pontellier drowning herself in the sea, but instead, that this homoerotic discourse was created and altered long before Radclyffe Hall would publish *The Well of Loneliness*, and it was meant to be secret and enjoyed privately – much in the way that Edna Pontellier retreats to read her novel in solitude. Perhaps this homoerotic discourse was not *forced* underground, as many would suppose, but was instead created with solitary enjoyment and contemplation in mind – an open secret that was only available to typically feminized subjects in order to provide an affective approximation of political power for queer women. I want to resist the normative urge to say that the spiritualization of homoerotic feelings on the part of women was due solely to the creation of a heteronormative social order. Instead, I would like to

suggest that while the creation of this coded homoerotic discourse cannot be totally separated from the rise of heteronormativity, it was also created and occurring before heteronormativity really took hold *as* the dominant discourse. Perhaps these women were feeling their way to political engagement while moving in a world that condemned male homosexuality but mostly ignored female homoerotic desire. By doing so, these women created a queer literary movement that appears reactionary at first glance, but a closer inspection reveals that it is actually the outcome of the artistic agency and experimentation of these female writers.

My readings build toward an argument that this type of aesthetic engagement ultimately led to the rise of queer performance in the twentieth century and not simply to a broader engagement with literary modernism. These female writers were reconfiguring a new relation to their reading public by communicating through these aesthetics, and in the process their works unhinged sexuality from the body and worked to position the performance of identity as a tangible possibility for gaining political agency. By transcending the body in order to erotically engage with other like-minded readers at the fin de siècle, a new relation between text and worldly experience arose that has not previously been critically accounted for. In some ways this relation may have more in common with late-twentieth century drag performance and less in common with high literary modernism, as is the familiar conception of the women's writing of the period. As Foucault says, "In order to gain mastery over [sexuality] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present" (17). Rather than simply using this aesthetic language in order to spiritualize queer feelings to obscure them from view, however, these women writers carefully reintegrate the mind/body split which typically

characterizes homoerotic discourse during the period. By harnessing the language of the aesthetic, these female-identified authors not only found a creative way to work around the societal constraints that restricted the linguistic expression of homoerotic attraction, but they also ironically transcended the conditions of embodiment in order to relocate sexual expression back to the body.

## Chapter One: "Ah! si tu savais!": The Queer Aesthetics of Edna Pontellier's Awakening

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* has become a touchstone text for feminist literary criticism, yet few scholars have considered the novel in terms of queer scholarship or from a standpoint that does not pivot on a heteronormative reading. Those scholars who have approached *The Awakening* from a queer perspective have typically limited their focus to Mademoiselle Reisz and Robert LeBrun. Critics and readers have been reluctant to consider Edna Pontellier's character through a queer lens, though Mary Biggs and Elizabeth LeBlanc have attempted to with varying degrees of success. For example, some criticism that specifically addresses the scene of Edna's awakening on the beach, which is prompted by the "gentle caress" of Adèle Ratignolle, reads their interaction as an example of Edna's status as outsider in the Creole community rather than as a scene that contains sexual undertones, despite the fact that a similar depiction of a sexually charged homoerotic interaction between women would not be historically inaccurate (Chopin 20). One issue that complicates these readings is that most of the historical grounding employed in previous criticism utilizes theories of lesbian identity that are based in cultural contextualization from Victorian England without accounting for the alterations in cultural thought that inevitably occur during transatlantic diffusion. Also, many queer theorists are too familiar with the problematic way that contemporary queer understandings have been grafted onto fictional representations written in the past. It is not my aim to reclaim Edna as an example of a nineteenth-century lesbian. I do argue, however, that the discursive representation of Edna's sexuality may be more fluid than has been previously argued and that these sexually charged interactions take place in the realm of the aesthetic – an ambiguous affective space but also a concrete space in which art is created – in *The Awakening*. Specifically, these interactions

take place at junctions which I have termed *aesthetic contact points*. These contact points reveal counternarratives within the novel that are structured by queer longings and desires. This queer aesthetic realm is constructed as a female-centered homoerotic space where alternate means of arousal and sexual engagement are privileged to the same extent as physical sexual acts. In the text of *The Awakening*, artistic production is being encoded and decoded by the female characters as a means of homoerotic expression and flirtatious play with sexual identities. The female characters navigate these permeable aesthetic and social borders in such a way that they move homoerotic same-sex desire from a covert realm directly into the realm of the aesthetic: into the public space and on display. When we read *The Awakening* through this queer aesthetic lens, we see that the novel is also engaging in this same work by flirting with moving Edna's sexual exploration from the covert and the veiled to the public literary space for an initiated reader, even though this exploration remains confined to the text.

Reading *The Awakening* from this perspective reveals the queer underpinnings of Chopin's construction of the novel, and queerness is elevated as a driving force behind the often-praised – and lamented – aesthetic complexity of the text. *The Awakening* serves as an example of fiction that allows for affective identification and attachment by way of a material product. As a result, fiction itself provides an attachment point for unnamed or unspoken desire for non-normative subjects, and desire itself is an optimistic straining toward that which has not yet happened – similar to the ebb and flow of Chopin's "voice of the sea." As a construct, desire necessarily has a stake in the future. Yet Chopin's famous work makes a case for deliberate and unapologetic solitude and fluid sexuality within the present moment. What happens when intangible desire takes root in something that is also seemingly

intangible, such as a textual encounter?

In order to illuminate and appreciate Edna Pontellier's queer leanings, I will begin with a historical framework that specifically addresses the emergence of an American nineteenth-century lesbian identity. Martha Vicinus draws attention to specific historical examples of intimate white American bourgeois lesbian relationships in her text *Intimate Friends*. She adds that her subjects were self-selecting (i.e., predominantly white and middle class) in the sense that white, educated, middle-class women were more likely to engage in the cultural practices that would allow them to become visible to future historians – namely writing in diaries and penning letters to intimates. Vicinus argues that such "strenuous efforts were made to define and delimit the bodily nature of female friendship" that the barrier between romantic and Platonic love must have seemed incredibly permeable (*xviii*). Furthermore, she claims that "only by constant reminders would women and men distinguish between friendship and love," and in this utterance Vicinus describes what can be referred to as the beginning of a strictly disciplined heterosexuality (*xviii*). Edna herself engages in scenes that can only be described as a self-regulating heteronormative system of reinforcement when she finds herself close to transgressing these porous boundaries between friendship and erotic homosexual acts. For example, during the scene when Edna is first awakened by Adèle Ratignolle's "confusing" yet "gentle caress," the first of Edna's thoughts that the implied reader is given access to is a briefly detailed account of her past female friendships (Chopin 20). The narration moves from a detailed account of Edna's female relationships to one that is quickly parlayed into a detailed catalogue of Edna's former heterosexual attractions, which seem reactionary in nature. The narrator even claims that the "persistence" of one of Edna's infatuations "lent [them] an aspect of genuineness," subtly

calling into question whether Edna was simply performing normative desire in her previous attractions to men (21). A distinguishing factor in the disciplining of Edna's sexuality is the reactionary heteronormative gesture that is generated by her intimate encounters with women – specifically in this case with Adèle. We consistently see a process of reorienting Edna's desire from a homoerotic attraction to a more socially acceptable heteronormative encounter within the novel. Edna's internal reaction to her homosocial encounter with Adèle can almost certainly be characterized as an example of the late-nineteenth century emergence of a self-regulating heteronormativity.

Of course, it would be a mistake to characterize the way heteronormativity functioned in the fin-de-siècle New Orleans Creole community as indistinguishable from the way heteronormativity functions in the modern world. In order to put Edna's experience in the text into historical perspective, Kathryn R. Kent's theories concerning the rise of an American *protolesbian* identity may be helpful. Kathryn R. Kent describes "protolesbian" identity "as a way to signal a historical connection to a modern lesbian subjectivity while at the same time acknowledging the difference made by the shift from a sexuality organized primarily through acts to one defined *as* identity" (2). Kent acknowledges that there was a historical shift that occurred during the formation of what would now be termed as lesbian identity from an identification formed primarily around engaging in homosexual acts and the adoption of a lesbian identity unto itself, divorced from action alone. While Edna does not literally engage in homosexual acts in the novel, she definitely does explore the boundaries that would define an act as homosexual by repeatedly blurring the line between the homosocial and homoerotic in her interactions with Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz. In the process, Edna's interactions with women begin to beg the question: what exactly defines a

sexual act?

The boundary between homosocial bonding and homoerotic passion in the late nineteenth century was one that was fraught with tension and ambiguity. According to Kathryn Kent, however, "it is often the tension between the homosocial and the homoerotic (and later the homosexual) that distinguishes 'women's culture' as a demarcated space and thus sustains it (Kent 15). In other words, this tension actually functioned to create for women a safe space of their own, existing outside of the roles of wife and mother that male phallogentric culture typically constructs for them. However, many novels written by or for women seemed to require the fulfillment of the marriage plot. If female characters were going to engage in an erotic friendship within a text, "it would have to be portrayed as fleeting and also, not surprisingly, [as] edifying for both involved" (124). This use of the intimate female friendship was common in nineteenth-century literature, and Kate Chopin would have been keenly aware of this literary strategy. The litany of infatuations and friends that Edna recalls while she is with Adèle on the beach participates in this narrative strategy by using female friendship as a catalyst for solidifying heterosexual attraction, but Chopin cleverly disrupts the normative expression of this trope. Chopin's principle biographer, Emily Toth, suggests that the character of Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening* was modeled on Chopin's close female friend Kitty Garesché. Toth reads Kitty Garesché's influence in several of Chopin's other works as well.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that she put this strategy to use in a alternative and more complex manner when she was writing *The Awakening*.

It has been well established in previous criticism that Mademoiselle Reisz can easily be interpreted as an example of a stereotypical nineteenth-century lesbian. As Kathryn Lee

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<sup>1</sup> Toth, Emily. *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. Print.

Seidel notes, "Mademoiselle Reisz embodies the traits of the female artist as lesbian, at least as the late nineteenth century understood this concept," and I would agree that Mlle. Reisz was previously, and continues to be, easily interpreted as a fin de siècle sexual deviant (199). Seidel goes on to argue that Mlle. Reisz "is disagreeable, eccentric, small, and unattractive; her ever-present sprig of artificial violets is a parody of feminine charm" (202). Edna begins visiting Mlle. Reisz for two reasons that are often cited in explications of the novel: to hear Robert LeBrun's correspondence, and because Edna wants to hear Mademoiselle play the piano. During a mood of particular despondency and stasis, Edna decides to "[hunt] up Mademoiselle Reisz" and she does not try to hide her desire "above all, to listen while she played the piano" (Chopin 65). It has been argued fairly consistently that Edna's visits to Mademoiselle Reisz in her New Orleans apartment occur mainly because of Edna's desire for Robert LeBrun and that Mademoiselle Reisz figures into these erotic interactions as nothing more than a mediator between Robert and Edna. Most readings also assume that Mlle. Reisz operates as a safe conduit for their dangerous heterosexual attraction which threatens the stability of Edna's marriage and family in all previous queer readings of the novel. Such a textual role – a trigger for heteronormative disciplining – need not require Mlle. Reisz to be the catalytic lesbian. Indeed this depiction of female friendship would have been quite accessible and familiar to a nineteenth century audience and to a contemporary critical audience. But I would argue that Chopin not only chooses to utilize this burgeoning intimate female friendship to aid a married woman in her courting of an extramarital affair, but she also turns this female-centered space into an eroticized queer space where the two women can engage in metaphorical homoerotic acts. The aesthetic register begins to function as another means of communication that is not constrained by embodiment in *The Awakening*.

Elizabeth LeBlanc argues in her reading of Edna as a *metaphorical* lesbian that through Chopin's portrayal of "Edna's profound frustration" she draws attention to the failure "of any available language to describe what she [Edna] is feeling. In the world of sexual (in)difference, the words for the longings of the metaphorical lesbian do not exist" (294). While LeBlanc's assertions are well supported, I believe they are also incomplete. Historically, the language to describe homosexual encounters did indeed exist, at least as it related to male homosexuality. After all, *The Awakening* was written soon after the internationally famous trials of Oscar Wilde (1895), and the concept of "inversion" was certainly fairly well known.<sup>2</sup> Chopin does, however, tap into a newly-forming aesthetic discourse of queer longing between women that was also used by Julia Magruder and Amy Levy<sup>3</sup>. So perhaps it is not that the language of homoerotic attraction did not exist, but rather that Chopin creates a specific female-centered language of attraction in her novel. A return to Martha Vicinus's text *Intimate Friends* further illuminates the emergence of nineteenth century same-sex desire by describing the phenomenon of women's coded manner of communicating: "Women wrote in code, warned each other to conceal or burn letters, and use metaphors or allusion. Far better, most women felt, to remain quiet and speak only to trustworthy allies" (*xix*). In the text of *The Awakening*, Chopin chooses language that is rooted in artistic production to describe what is emotionally or physically experienced by the female characters. This type of language allows the women of the text to experiment with same-sex desire while still remaining hidden in plain sight.

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<sup>2</sup> Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay offer a comprehensive history of inversion in the Western world in their book *Sex Before Sexuality*.

<sup>3</sup> Please see Chapters Two and Three for a more detailed discussion.

Consider the scene when Edna paints a portrait of the maid who works for the Pontellier family. Shortly after Edna stomps on her wedding ring and decides to take up painting at the Pontellier's house in New Orleans, Edna notices that the house-maid's back and shoulders were "modeled on classical lines" and her hair "became an inspiration" (64). While Edna paints the house-maid's image, the narrator gives a literal description of what Edna sees and then proceeds to construct Edna's picturesque line of thinking which originates in the previously depicted scene. This is a common motif that is presented by the narrator throughout the text:

Edna perceived that the young woman's back and shoulders were molded on classic lines, and that her hair, loosened from its confining cap, became an inspiration. While Edna worked sometimes she sang low the little air. "*Ah! si tu savais!*"... It moved her with recollections. She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could feel the glint of the moon upon the bay and feel the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind. A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn (64).

This scene is haunted by Edna's memory of the boat ride with Robert where he sang Balfe's "*Ah! si tu savais*" to her. This scene is only depicted in the text as a memory – neither the reader nor the narrator is ever actually granted access to the original interaction. But this overt reading is also complicated by the implications of Edna's song (which tellingly translates to "*Ah! If you knew!*" or "*Couldst thou know*") combined with the fact that Edna's

fantasy originates from gazing at the maid's shoulders in order to paint this portrait. The combination of text, image, and music work together to create a new aesthetic register within the novel. Edna's body accounts for these emotive longings before she or the narrator analyze the implications that are attached to these desires, marking them as pre-lingual. The image of the maid's naked shoulders provides a catalyst for Edna to *hear* the water and to *feel* the warmth of the sun on her skin before a "subtle current of desire passes through her body." Edna experiences an erotic, psychological transference that is mediated through art in this scene. The objectification of the maid – due to the portrayal of her as a racial other – is undoubtedly troubling, yet it is also not entirely surprising due to the fact that the novel contains quite problematic portrayals of race and class. While it could be argued that Edna is not experiencing homoerotic desire but rather simply expressing her desire to be an artist and subsequently an autonomous individual through creating her art, this place in the story is not the only time that homoerotic interaction is the precursor of conscious desire during the creation of art in *The Awakening*. At the very least, Edna's desire to be an artist is inflected by these encounters with female bodies in the text.

The *current of desire* that passes through Edna's body when she paints the maid's portrait is similar to the desire she feels when Mademoiselle Reisz plays piano for her privately. During Mlle. Reisz's performance of Frédéric Chopin's Impromptu, Mlle. Reisz intertwines portions of Wagner's composition of *Tristan and Isolde*. The narrator says that "strange, new voices awoke" in Edna while Mademoiselle played the "quivering" notes of Isolde's song with "soulful, poignant longing" (Chopin 71). Later, Mademoiselle's piano playing is also described as "penetrat[ing] [Edna's] whole being" (89). Mary Biggs has previously described Mlle. Reisz' musical communication as homoerotic in nature: "From

her first to her last, she is shown as [the character] who has compressed all of her emotion, warmth, kindness, and sensuality into her music, which has become her safely wordless voice” and “only through her music does she make love” (167). Biggs also argues that Edna’s sexual fantasies are “music-borne,” but she does not attribute Edna’s interactions with Mlle. Reisz to homoerotic desire on Edna’s part, despite the textual evidence for such an interaction (157). While Biggs provides a thorough and convincing interpretation of the text, including a particularly compelling queer reading of Robert Lebrun, she consistently portrays the interactions between Mlle. Reisz and Edna as an unreciprocated obsession on the part of Mlle. Reisz. Biggs refers to this scene as “the most graphic sexual scene in *The Awakening* and certainly Edna’s most fulfilling experience of passion with Robert!” (168). But to read the most overtly erotic scene in the novel as nothing more than Edna using Mlle. Reisz as a conduit to express desire for Robert is to engage in what I would like to call wishful misreading.

In order to reveal a more homoerotic reading, one must remember the circumstances under which Edna arrives at Mlle. Reisz’s residence. Edna seeks out Mlle. Reisz because she “felt a desire to see her – above all, to listen while she played the piano” (Chopin 65). Edna actively seeks out companionship with Mlle. Reisz with the expressed purpose of hearing her music. Not knowing her address, however, she attempts to find it by visiting Mlle. Reisz’s old residence and a grocer before finally arriving at Madame Lebrun’s house where she inquires about Mlle. Reisz – not Robert. She does not ask Madame Lebrun or Victor about Robert, but they relate the contents of his letters to her anyway. After Victor “rattled off” the contents of Robert’s letters, the “despondent frame of mind in which she had left home began again to overtake her, and she remembered that she wished to find Mademoiselle Reisz” (67-

8). This choice of language suggests that Victor's company – or possibly hearing about Robert – strikes Edna as somehow tiresome, despite the fact that she does behave as if she's excited to hear the contents of Robert's letter to Mlle. Reisz. It is also worth noting that at this point in the narrative, Edna does not know that Robert is corresponding with Mlle. Reisz. During the scene between the two women, in contrast, someone is indeed used as a mediator for desire. I would argue that it is not Mademoiselle as many critics have supposed, however.

After Mlle. Reisz touches Edna's hand and executes "a sort of double theme upon the back and palm" the women begin their exchange of flirtatious banter. Mlle. Reisz charges "for I really don't believe you like me, Mrs. Pontellier," and Edna replies, "I don't know whether I like you or not" (69). This moment is often read as an indicator of social hierarchy, and Mrs. Pontellier's reservations about Mlle. Reisz as a mark of Edna's social standing being jeopardized by associating with "the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street" (65). However, Edna expresses few reservations about interacting with her in social situations otherwise. Additionally, the suggestive interaction between the two women continues. Once Edna learns that Robert has written a letter (about her!) to Mlle. Reisz, she repeatedly asks to see it while Mlle. Reisz repeatedly refuses her requests in a lighthearted manner. Mlle. Reisz claims that Robert wanted her to play the piano for Edna – specifically the *Impromptu* – but the reader never finds out if this is the case at all. Once Mlle. Reisz hands the letter to Edna, she never actually reads it. She never even looks at it. She in fact drops it, forgotten, to the floor during Mlle. Reisz's erotically charged fusion of the *Impromptu* and *Tristan and Isolde*. A straightforward heteronormative reading of this scene privileges the letter from Robert combined with Mlle. Reisz's music as a stand-in for Robert himself, but how does an unread and practically unnoticed letter function as a

symbol of erotic impetus when it lies crumpled and forgotten on the floor during the most “graphic sexual scene” in the novel? The short answer is, it does not. Reading this scene as anything other than a homoerotic sexual encounter, albeit a confusing one for Edna, is not a product of textual evidence so much as proof of both the contemporary and current cultural erasure of queer possibilities.

This depiction of homoerotic engagement veiled by metaphor is historically accurate as well. Martha Vicinus claims that "Neither a pornographic nor a scientific vocabulary provided women with the language of love, so nineteenth-century educated women fashioned their sexual selves through metaphor" (Vicinus xxv). Vicinus claims that erotic female friendships were often "linked [through metaphor] with public issues, including the law, religion, education, work, art, and money" (Vicinus xxx). I would argue that Chopin intentionally uses artistic metaphors that stand in for homoerotic sexual desire in *The Awakening*. Richard Brodhead also claims in *Cultures of Letters* that by embracing "high-cultural order," appreciation of art can "create new bonds between women," and as a result it is not historically outlandish to consider the possibility that Kate Chopin may have been engaging with these cultural insights in her text (155). There is no doubt that *The Awakening* is a highly symbolic text that often communicates social position through metaphor: Edna is repeatedly aligned with bird imagery which encapsulates her fragile social position along with providing a symbolic reference that anticipates her flight from domesticity at any moment. There is little reason to suggest that one should not extend this employment of metaphorical language to Edna's emerging and complicated sexuality as well. Martha Vicinus also provides a historical reason that Kate Chopin may have been willing to use aesthetic metaphors as a covert way of talking about homoerotic experimentation. She claims

that for writers, "metaphor and metonymy spoke for a passion that was better imagined than fully described" because "The unnamed cannot be censored" (Vicinus 234). In order to fully define the boundaries of who is actually permitted to participate in these queer aesthetics however, it may be helpful to examine what occurs in the text when other characters attempt to harness these same aesthetic metaphors.

When Victor Lebrun attempts to sing "Ah! si tu savais!" to Edna while attending the party she arranges at her pigeon house, her reaction is severe and immediate. She cries "Stop!... I don't want you to sing it" and then she breaks a glass in her attempt to hastily put it down on the table, spilling wine on Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp, before covering his mouth with her hand (Chopin 100). Victor proceeds despite her insistence, however, and continues to sing the song that has been previously established as a mark of both Edna's relationship with Robert and as an example of her voyeurism toward a female subject. In this scene, Victor can be read as an unwanted, violent intruder into the female homoerotic space that Edna has been constructing with the other female characters throughout the text. The implied reader is momentarily given access into the veiled queer aesthetics of the novel when Victor attempts to sexualize Edna by using a medium that has been used to construct the homoerotic space in the text. This moment is jarring for several reasons: the metaphorical and ideological violence that is perpetrated by Victor Lebrun during this scene, and Edna's swift and assertive reaction to a man in late nineteenth-century America. Predominantly though, this moment that disrupts the implied reader is one that the narrator either will not define or cannot define. This is because the narrator and the implied reader have been granted a "jarring" and "discordant" moment to peer inside a queer perspective that would not be considered familiar by nineteenth-century standards, or possibly even by twenty-first century

heteronormative standards (101).

Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse claim in their influential text *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* that "there are occasional references in regionalist fiction, particularly in the 1880s and later, to characters [that] readers in the twenty-first century would associate with queer politics and queer theory," including sometimes "women who manifest same sex attraction" (335). These attractions historically, however, have never been straightforward and obvious; they were consistently coded as ambiguous and metaphorical in nineteenth-century American literature. There is a grammatically ambiguous moment in the text of *The Awakening* that can offer insight into the way that heteronormative readings of the novel can misdirect the implied reader, causing the reader to misread these subtle homoerotic musings. Consider this ambiguous moment when Edna ponders Robert's interludes with another woman in Mexico: "She recalled his words, his looks. How few and meager they had been for her hungry heart! A vision – a transcendently seductive vision of a Mexican girl arose before her. She writhed with a jealous pang" (Chopin 114). Grammatically, the antecedent of Edna's jealousy is actually the *transcendently seductive vision of a Mexican girl*, and not Robert's gaze as a strictly heteronormative reading would suppose.

I refer to these ambiguous points within the text as aesthetic contact points, and *The Awakening* contains more of these sexually ambiguous sites than one would originally suppose. Often, these ambiguities surface during a repeated image or song within the text as well. Bentita von Heynitz refers to the repeated elements of the novel as an example of a musical *leitmotif*, which I find to be a very persuasive and productive concept. A leitmotif is "a set sequence of tones which reappears throughout the piece, characterizing persons or

situations,” and the leitmotif draws upon the musical frames of major and minor keys and resolutions (58). Heynitz uses the leitmotif of *the sea* as an example in *The Awakening* which she claims “appears as a melody or refrain, leading to a rhythmic structuring of the text” which has a “two-fold musical quality” (58-9). Rather than highlighting the larger musically influenced frames of the narrative, like Heynitz, my argument instead focuses on the minor key progressions of the novel; the melodic elements that can be picked out by a trained ear, but for the average listener will blend into the overall experience of the piece, simultaneously present but indistinguishable. Similarly, an initiated reader would be able to infer the homoerotic elements of the text that a heteronormative reader would more than likely miss. Ultimately, von Heynitz’ reading is too so invested in compulsory heterosexuality that she relegates Mlle. Reisz’ function in the novel to “[preparing] the ground of happiness for others,” and robs her of any agency or personal desire within the text. Heynitz even goes so far to claim that “Mlle. Reisz is instrumental for the thriving of [Edna and Robert’s] relationship,” relegating Mlle Reisz to a purely functionary position within the novel that suggests that all close interactions between women exist purely for the eventual satisfaction of men (60). While I do not think this conflation of women with sexual caretakers is intentional, it is still a problematic conclusion in an otherwise careful reading.

The recurrence of theme and image within *The Awakening* is also mentioned by Mary Biggs: “Every line of *The Awakening* is intentional; every image, every action, every conversation, every description, every figure of speech, refers forward and usually backward in the text, following and reinforcing the cyclical rhythms of the novel’s core themes... everything is repeated, but in a different context or a different way with a new or intensified meaning” (147). Let us consider the scene where Edna paints the family maid once more

with leitmotif in mind: “While Edna worked sometimes she sang low the little air. “*Ah! si tu savais!*” ... It moved her with recollections. She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could feel the glint of the moon upon the bay and feel the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind” (64). This impressionistic description is repeated yet altered slightly during the party at Madame Ratignolle’s house when Edna tells the following tale to her Father and Doctor Mandelet. The narrator relates the following story:

[S]he had [a story] of her own to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this. It was pure invention. She said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That, also, was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had. But every glowing word seemed real to those who listened. They could feel the hot breath of the Southern night; they could hear the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of birds’ wings, rising startled from among the reeds in the salt-water pools; they could see the faces of the lovers, pale, close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown (78).

In this fiction Edna weaves two previously described scenes together to create a new aesthetic product, much in the same manner that Mlle. Reisz weaved together the musical compositions of Chopin and Wagner. Edna’s inaccessible – and potentially fabricated –

memory of Robert combines with the description used when she painted the maid to create Edna's decidedly gender-pronoun neutral and erotically haunted fantasy of escape from normativity. Edna's narration conjures a sensory experience in the minds of the party guests, but this imagery loses its sexually charged potential in the translation. If artwork is indeed functioning as a mediator of sex in the public sphere, this is an example of the way artistic production that does not participate in this endeavor functions within the confines of the text.

The aesthetic contact points revealed during the course of the narrative are much more than simply an interesting juxtaposition or a narrative technique: this is a new experience and exploration both of literature and of the interior world that is undoubtedly intentional on Chopin's part. Heynitz arrives at a similar conclusion in her reading of *The Awakening* as an example of Wagner's version of a *gesamtkunstwerk* – a new type of experimental artwork made popular in the late-nineteenth century: “all the branches of art, such as dance, music, poetry, and painting should coalesce into one piece of art” and that “the perception of such an art work should appeal to the visual, the auditory, and the sensual-emotional senses of the recipient” (63). *The Awakening* does indeed participate in several methods of artistry in order to express Edna's experience of the world. Edna's journey of discovery as an artist – which could be read as an example of a *künstlerroman* (an artist coming-of-age novel) – is defined primarily by the painting imagery used to narrate Edna's thought processes. It is worth noting that the novel that is widely considered the first lesbian novel, the now famous *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, is also now considered to be a *künstlerroman*. The accompanying and sometimes primary musical narrative defines the ways that both Mademoiselle Reisz's and the Farival Twins interact with the world and with those who desire connection with them. The act of musical

performance allows these characters to define the limits of their interactions with others in the text on their own terms. Oftentimes, music and imagery combine in *The Awakening* with the purpose of generating a sensory experience for the reader or listener, as evidenced by Edna's storytelling at Madame Ratignolle's party.

Yet these types of categorizations too fall short when it comes to reading *The Awakening*, and this is due to the queer sensibility that the novel portrays. In fact, the novel's categorization as an example of a gesamtkunstwerk is a direct result of the incomplete ability of common language to describe Edna's intensely personal queer feelings. As a result, queerness becomes a defining element of the novel which may provide the impetus for Chopin's new approach to the artistic experimentation of the prose. Edna may rely on others of either sex for her sexual gratification, but these partnered encounters are portrayed as confusing moments that tend to resist straightforward interpretation because of these complicated aesthetics. While Edna alternately desires Mlle. Reisz and Robert, they both also fade in and out of importance to Edna throughout the course of the narrative. Robert eventually even "[brings] forth a crash of discordant sound" after his much anticipated and ultimately disappointing return from Mexico (Chopin 108). The only transparently calm scenes of the novel are the moments when Edna touches her own skin, and when the narrator describes Edna's joyful move to the pigeon house. The narrator says "There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (104). Edna longs to cast off the familial and social attachments that constrain her, and these brief moments of peace appear when she has been able to do so, however fleeting these moments may be.

While Edna clearly values and strives toward solitude, it is not surprising that she flirts with homoerotic attraction along her way to independence. As discussed previously, female-centered narratives often relied on homoerotic tension between two women as a social form of learning that was thought to culminate in the successful fulfillment of the marriage plot. According to Sharon Marcus, friendship between women was deemed acceptable and quite positive for heterosexual marriage during the Victorian era because it was thought that friendship "cultivated the feminine virtues of sympathy and altruism that made women into good helpmates" (Marcus 26). Another widely-accepted courting strategy that often appeared in literature was the didactic plot in which the male love interest serves as a role-model and teacher to the female love object. Chopin combines these two popular tropes in her treatment of Edna Pontellier's sexual awakening, yet she subverts the normative gendering of the objects of desire. Edna uses this social and literary convention not to become a wife and mother – traps which she has already discovered as unfulfilling and oppressive – but to unlearn her attachment to normativity itself, whether that normativity is gendered or sexual. Because of the cultural invisibility and deliberate erasure of queer existence in late nineteenth-century America, her queer longings obscure this logic from those who surround her, including oftentimes even the narrator.

Within this framework, her suicide can be read as both her downfall and her triumph – her final escape from normativity – precisely because it is a decision that she makes in the moment, and on her own terms. In the logic of the text, the present moment is the only moment that matters. The narrator has previously informed the reader that "The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to

torture her" (Chopin 51). The narrator points out, in not so subtle terms, that Edna has no intention of learning from her previous mistakes, and that she is inclined to punish herself in every moment — this is also an aspect of Chopin's take on Schopenhauer.

Despite this intrusion, what is reinforced for the reader is that Edna values the present moment, and this is very much the way in which her sexuality plays out in the novel. Her sexual impulse is self-generated, and mostly self-sustained in keeping with the period conception of Eros, which only bolsters the theme of independent female autonomy presented in the novel. Edna's sexual object choices are also not fixed – the sex of the chosen partner ebbs and flows, and her desire itself forms and dissipates just as quickly as it began. In her portrayal of Edna, Chopin offers an interesting approach to desire in itself. As mentioned previously, desire can be thought of as an ideological relation to the future. In the act of desiring, one reveals an urge to draw a future into being that has not yet happened. As a result, desire is always fictitious or fantastic in its nature. Yet, in spite of her sexual exploration and her continual discussion of becoming an artist, Edna only truly desires one thing that she keeps returning to throughout the course of the novel: "I'm not going to be forced into doing things. . . I want to be let alone" (123). The only future that Edna seems to actually long for is the one in which she no longer exists. When Edna's suicide is considered within the queer framework of the novel, a very bleak view of the possibility of a lived, queer existence emerges. Edna's suicide may be a triumph in light of my own decidedly optimistic reading of Edna's sense of agency, but Chopin suggests there is no room in the late-nineteenth century for the literal expression of queer attraction.

*The Awakening* emerges not only as a narrative that argues for individual female subjectivity and autonomy, but also as a text that works to subtly normalize homoerotic

sexual exploration, even if that exploration does not lead to acceptance in the public sphere. This normalization works to move social understanding and acceptance into the public realm without the hope of this acceptance actually coming to fruition. Despite the novel's primary commitment to solitude, the queer framework of *The Awakening* does provide a scaffolding that allows for the transmission of queer feelings and desires alongside of the primary narrative within the novel to an initiated or receptive reader. This affective transmission provides a literary space of communal inclusion for marginalized individuals within a novel that proposes self-imposed solitude as the ideal. An ironic proposal, indeed. Chopin seems to suggest that an aesthetically meditated space is the only truly safe space for queer subjects. In a way, this positions *The Awakening* as a public type of private correspondence that is not a call for public action or wider social awareness. Instead, the novel participates in the creation of a queer space of belonging for readers. When Edna feels the need to read her book "in secret and solitude" and "hide it from the sound of approaching footsteps," this is precisely the queer intimate public that she finds solace in (12).

Chapter Two: "Love Me In Full Being": Julia Magruder, Charles Dana Gibson, and  
Composing the Compromising New Woman

In chapter one, we investigated Kate Chopin's literary exploration of the option of a queer existence between women, but *The Awakening* ultimately closed the door on the realization of such a hopeful, lived possibility. In contrast, the critically long-neglected novels of Virginia writer Julia Magruder use this queer intimate public – which is revealed at what I have termed *aesthetic contact points* – to explore the possibility of rethinking the structure of heterosexual marriage in the late-nineteenth century. This conceptual relation rests on the necessary infusion of intimate female friendship with normative marriage; a relation quite similar to the one Magruder lived in life with her intimate friend, fellow best-selling Virginia author Amélie Rives, and Amélie's husband John Armstrong Chanler. Magruder's novels are overtly sentimental in nature, and as a result they rely heavily on the reader's capacity to learn through feeling. I would argue that in addition to this sentimental impulse Magruder's novels, especially *The Princess Sonia* and *The Violet*, take part in a late-nineteenth century literary motif that Lauren Berlant calls *female complaint fiction*. According to Berlant, the

female complaint *is* a discourse of disappointment...But let us not think that the complaint carries the force of devastating critique, even as it manifests the ruthlessness of emotional measurement...the fantasy dictum that love *ought to be* the gift that keeps on *giving* is a fundamental commitment of female complaint rhetoric. The position of the depressive realist who sees that love is nonetheless the gift that keeps on taking is the

source of complaint epistemology [emphasis Berlant's], (13-15).

The female complaint novel recognizes a seeming irony within its own ideology: that in order to critique a structure or an object, a subject must invest in the fantasy of an ideal that does not exist in reality. For example, to critique heterosexual marriage one must believe that heterosexual marriage can be perfected, and in order for this arrangement to actually function as a fulfilling venture in a generalized intimate public of readers, the institution must also fulfill the needs of the non-normative subject. Within female complaint fiction it is possible to critique an institution while still desiring the normalcy that accompanies participation in that institution.

Magruder's writing frequently calls marriage out as an institution that strips women of personal power and positions their needs as secondary to the needs of men. Magruder does attempt to reconcile this imbalance by renegotiating the arrangement of heteronormative marriage in her work, though it is worth noting that this fantasy of a better good life is ultimately overturned at the conclusion of her novels and the critique and the alternatives that it proposes remain confined to the aesthetic realm. It is possible to read the problematic conclusions of these novels as an example of *cruel optimism*. Cruel optimism, as Lauren Berlant theorizes, is a relation that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (*Cruel Optimism* 1). There is little doubt that a woman's yearning for a typical heteronormative marriage at the conclusion of the nineteenth century could be considered an obstacle to political and personal emancipation for her. Nor would it be a mistake to read the fairly normative conclusions of Magruder's novels as works of fiction that shed light on this relation. But when these novels are examined closely and read as an

example of female complaint fiction, Magruder's writing neither has to be ideologically opposed to the privilege that heteronormativity brings, nor does her critique of heterosexual relations have to be fundamentally at odds or incompatible with the fulfillment of the marriage plot. It is possible to wish for egalitarian change while still desiring normalcy, even when that normalcy is knowingly purchased at the cost of personal or political emancipation. Magruder and her fiction are participating in a culture of affective world-building that cannot be reduced simply to either a political argument for female emancipation or an example of the apolitical nature of sentimental women's culture. One necessarily includes the other in this affect world. The intimate public in which Magruder's fiction participates constructs a space where women from all walks of life can have, according to Lauren Berlant, "permission to live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too; to be critical without detaching from disappointing and dangerous worlds and objects of desire" (*The Female Complaint* 3).

Participation in an intimate public is supposed to help female readers dissolve the borders that exist between women from a variety of social and economic situations, and to establish affective connections between these women who otherwise live very different lives. According to Berlant, "the intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates *situations* where those qualities can appear as luminous," and as a result, women's culture creates the conditions for the legitimization of the concerns of marginalized subjects within its boundaries (3). This may be the ultimate goal of an intimate public, but the intersection of race, class, and sexuality do play a role in who may claim agency within an intimate public, and who will ultimately feel drawn into its nebulous borders in the first place. Julia Magruder's writing,

much like Kate Chopin's, was undoubtedly more popular with white, middle-class readers due to both the nature of the publishing industry during the nineteenth century and the fact that these women were writing within their specific historical conditions that were not so favorable to people of color and the working-class.<sup>4</sup> As a result, this specifically queer intimate public that Magruder attempts to engage with is dominated by white, middle-class, predominantly heterosexual, cosmopolitan women who were interested in international travel, and who most likely had disposable incomes. But the queer counternarratives presented within this intimate public are still described in a covert way, which suggests that the use of aesthetic mediation is still necessary. Even within the affective space created by this generalized intimate public, non-normative sexuality still had to remain secretive. Berlant's theories of the egalitarian nature of an intimate public work well because her conception of intimate publics must include the generalization of large groups of people in order for the transmission of affect to take place. My reading of Magruder suggests that this is actually true: intimate publics are still able to transmit affect despite the inclusion of non-normative subjects, but this inclusion does not necessarily lead to measurable, positive social progress for those subjects. I would argue that it is not inconsistent to acknowledge the positivity inherent in the urge toward generalization and the less than hopeful way that the intersectional realities of women's lives prevent social change, or even social visibility, from actually taking place.

As demonstrated by *The Awakening*, women's culture was communicated to initiated readers at aesthetic contact points. But how are these readers initiated in the first place? This

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<sup>4</sup> The specific magazines that Chopin's and Magruder's works were frequently published in include titles such as *The Atlantic* and *The Century*; two publications targeted primarily at more liberal, white, middle-class readers. While the audiences of these specific magazines may have been sympathetic to members of oppressed classes of people, they were far less likely to actually be a member of those classes themselves.

chapter will argue that mass-market sentimental print culture is a site where this initiation takes place, and specifically within some of Julia Magruder's best-selling novels on both sides of the Atlantic. Julia Magruder's novels *The Princess Sonia* (1895) and *The Violet* (1896) were illustrated by Charles Dana Gibson – creator of the American icon, the Gibson Girl – and I will show how these illustrations work in tandem with Magruder's fiction to draw predominantly female readers from the United States and England into an intimate public in order to build an affective community with one another. This intimate public does not directly engage with the political sphere, but the overall goal of the project is more political in nature than a first reading of Magruder's work would suggest. I would argue that Magruder's novels aim to mediate a discussion about the cultural conception of the sexually and politically liberated New Woman, and that Magruder's fiction brought gender politics to working- and middle-class women, and sexually non-normative women, in a manner that allowed them to take ownership of the movement and define it in their own terms.

The wider social visibility of the intimate public to those who are not hailed as members in it is directly connected to lulls in the political realm, despite the subtle political workings of the novels. During times of political turmoil – the American Civil War, economic crashes, etc – women's writing has been historically tagged by male writers and scholars as merely aesthetic, apolitical, or frivolous. As Jane Turner Censer argues, at the close of the nineteenth century southern male writers were “reluctant to take women's writings or even women authors themselves very seriously,” and “women writers were singled out not as gifted amateurs but as badly educated exhibitionists” (236-9). As a result, the political realm tended to overshadow the efforts of many female writers. Despite the economic concerns that surfaced at the close of the century – such as enormous wealth inequality and a constantly

fluctuating stock market – women's writing flourished, and the public literary sphere on both sides of the Atlantic became inundated with profitable writing penned by female authors. This increase in the visibility of women's culture was problematically tied to the rise of Capitalist ideology and its accompanying social practices which aimed to profit financially from the women's culture that it simultaneously worked to oppress politically. These works of fiction that experiment with non-normative sexualities and relations may not always seem to directly engage with the political, but they flourished alongside it and despite of it nonetheless. These female writers may have been experimenting with an aesthetic mediation toward non-normative relations in the public literary sphere because there was space for the discourse in the public sphere in the absence of war and the rise of Capitalism in the Gilded Age.

Julia Magruder's writings have been almost completely neglected critically during the twentieth-century push toward a national canon formation. Though she was a best-selling author at the conclusion of the nineteenth century, all of her novels and short stories are now out of print. The French government even recommended Magruder to the French Academy so that she might receive the Order of the Palm. She was selected for the prestigious award one week before her untimely death from Bright's disease, now known as chronic nephritis, in 1907. To the credit of the community she is from, Magruder has not been forgotten on a local level by the residents of Charlottesville, Virginia. The University of Virginia Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library meticulously maintains an archive of many of Magruder's letters and personal effects, as well as many first editions and personal copies of Magruder's novels. Though, even in Charlottesville she is mostly remembered as the intimate friend of Amélie Rives, whose novels and biography have both retained a bit of a following

in terms of local lore. Sole critic of Magruder's work, Historian Jane Censer Turner, discusses the literary contributions made by Magruder in terms of the post-war reconstruction of white, female identity in the American South. Through her careful readings of *Across the Chasm* and *A Sunny Southerner*, Censer positions these novels as examples of the attempt made by Southern women writers after the American Civil War to construct "a new version of the national romance" (249). While Censer's readings of Magruder's novels are quite detailed and compelling, they do also work to cement Magruder's position as merely an example of a Southern writer, despite the fact that many of her novels are quite cosmopolitan and have very little to do with bolstering American national or regional identity. While it is obviously not a mistake to read Magruder as an example of a regionalist writer, I would argue that it also does not provide a comprehensive picture of her body of work.

Magruder's novel *The Princess Sonia* was first published in *The Century* in 1895 with the first installment appearing in the May edition. It appeared in an issue which also included a narrative scene titled "The Realm of Fiction," which was a satirical portrayal of the swiftly changing demographics of marriage in America. With incessant debate of *the woman question* raging on both sides of the Atlantic and the rise of the New Woman in the cosmopolitan middle-classes, the average age of a first marriage for a woman was steadily rising, as was her level of education. Julia Magruder was without a doubt aiming to be included as one of these new women writers as evidenced by the themes present in her work and her affiliation with Gibson's illustrations, which were culturally aligned with the changing cultural expression of femininity. At the end of the century many of these authors wrote about women who "wanted to achieve social and political power by reinventing rather than rejecting their domestic role," and Magruder's romantic novels certainly participate in

this venture (Richardson and Willis 9). "The Realm of Fiction" credits British writer George Eliot as a catalyst for the changing ideology concerning domesticity in the Americas. The character of "The Heroine" responds to "The Hero[is]" complaints about this New Woman with "I tried hard to love you in Charlotte Brontë's time, I'm sure; but you trampled on me so that I got tired. And George Eliot showed me what you really were, though she had lingering weakness for you too" ("The Realm of Fiction" 160). It is more than likely that Magruder's views of gender relations were informed by Eliot's own views; Magruder was an avid reader and fan of Eliot's work, and in 1895 Magruder even edited a collection of sketches of children that were from George Eliot's novels titled, appropriately, *Child Sketches From George Eliot*. In 1895 it became apparent that Magruder recognized the potential of illustration in fiction: both *Child Sketches of George Eliot* and *The Princess Sonia* were published with accompanying illustrations that spanned the length of the text, and they were the first of Magruder's works to do so. Through her collaboration with illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, Magruder's novels began to do the cultural work of aligning literal images of modern femininity with metaphorical representations of non-normative desire, as will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

*The Princess Sonia* was Magruder's first novel that relied heavily on the reader to incorporate concrete visual illustrations and descriptions of artwork into the overall interpretation of the novel – a technique later modulated by Chopin in *The Awakening*. The principle characters in Magruder's novel *The Princess Sonia* are the young American woman Martha Keene, and Sonia, who in actuality is an English woman whom Martha believes to be a Russian princess. During the course of the novel it is revealed that Sonia's real name is Sophia Rutledge, and she is in fact the young, estranged wife of Martha's brother Harold.

Because their courtship was a whirlwind romance that took place overseas, Martha had never met Sophia before meeting her incidentally (or as a fated encounter, as Martha would describe it) as a fellow student at an atelier in Paris. The scene in which Martha becomes acquainted with Sophia is one that is communicated through a mostly unspoken, affective interaction within the walls of the atelier where both women study nude model painting. Unspoken affective communication between intimates becomes the preferred method of communication within the novel, including many multi-paged descriptions of stares that occur between Sophia and Harold. Magruder works hard in the novel to show the social and emotional value of both public and private art, and as a result, creating artwork – and the aesthetics of viewing – functions as a mediator for desire between the characters. Martha and Sophia’s fellow students are a mixed-class lot of “aristocrats and plebeians,” a social arrangement that the narrator claims produced conditions that were “opposed to such mixing” under normal circumstances (*The Princess Sonia* 4). Despite this, Sophia positions her easel close to Martha’s one morning, much to Martha’s delight since she had been previously admiring Sophia from afar, and the two begin their intimate friendship by painting their names to one another on their respective canvases:

The princess was painting, laying on her color in a broad and daring style that almost frightened her neighbor...It was a bewildering delight to her to stand so close to the princess and to see her work, and she was agreeably aware that the princess was also aware of her, and perhaps even pleased at their being together... Across one corner of her canvas Martha’s name was scrawled in full, and she knew that the princess must have seen

it. She looked to see if there was any signature upon the princess's picture, and, as if interpreting her thought, her neighbor, with a brilliant smile dipped her brush in vermilion, and wrote in a bold, strong hand the word "Sonia" (10-11).

In addition to introducing the two women, this scene also demonstrates Sophia's status as a daring and independent New Woman. Her choice of *bold* and *daring* colors strikes Martha as both dangerous and fascinating, and this brief contact with the appearance of rebellion draws Martha further into Sophia's sphere without damaging Sophia's reputation with the implied reader. While Martha has already been categorized as a naive and kind girl, she is also "incorrigibly shy" and her "reserve of manner was so evident that it discouraged advances from others," yet this does not deter Sophia from recognizing her as a potential companion (5). Sophia's character is established in this scene as being daring yet kind, bold but intuitive, and above all she is put forward as someone who understands that intimate bonds may be formed by creating and viewing together. Sophia goes quickly from introducing herself on the canvas to taking Martha on a tour of Parisian public artworks, and during this tour their bond is solidified. In addition, the scene also functions as a tour of Paris for a typical American reader of *The Century*, bringing Europe into the living rooms of working- and middle-class American women.

Parisian architecture also features as an aesthetic medium that is used by the characters to convey information about one's emotional state to others. Sophia tells Martha on one of their shared carriage rides around Paris that "I always look at the [Arc de Triomphe] whenever I can...and it always has something to say to me" (52). Sophia then invites Martha to share in this emotional aesthetic experience by saying to her "we must, [look at it] some day,

together. It will give you a new sensation” (52). In these interactions, Magruder flirts with her reading public by pointing to the erotic potential of public art, effectively sexualizing the material world for her readers. There seems to be an understanding between these women that artwork experienced in and by a collective group has the ability to alter the ultimate meaning of the artwork, and that alteration opens up the possibility of new communal relations. The women bond over their oddly similar renaming of a statue and Sophia happily exclaims “Oh how nice it is that we can think and feel together in this way!” (56). The narrator then relays the following: “Her face, as she spoke, was glowingly beautiful; and Martha returned her gaze with a look which expressed what no words could possibly have done” (56). In *The Princess Sonia* emotional responses are invoked, analyzed, and interpretively understood by the other characters through creating art and viewing the art created by others, and these emotional responses are key in the bonding process between the female characters. The novel suggests that there are some experiences that cannot be expressed by language; these experiences must be communicated on an affective level, and artwork is the chosen site for a communal experience.

Artwork also functions as a medium that has the capability to reveal intimate thoughts and feelings to those who are not intended to receive these messages, however. Sophia fears that Harold will be privy to her emotional longing for him if he sees the artwork that she personally created. She even goes so far as to display her artwork at a gallery under a false name so that she can reduce the chances of Harold discovering her true feelings, though, of course, Harold is able to spot her artwork and its significance despite her cautious measures. Martha and Sophia are both present during the scene where Harold first views Sophia’s artwork, and the triangulation of gazes is described by prose that is erotically charged.

Sophia's "color deepen[s]" and she "[draws] herself erect" while Harold studies her nude portrait (138). Martha's "sensitive organism," in the meantime, receives "impressions of pleasure" from both Sophia and Harold (138). Martha figures as a medium for their emotional responses and this is a trend that continues throughout most of the text. It is important to note that Martha remains a prominent figure in their relationship, but she cannot be considered as a surrogate child, which was a common depiction of close female friendship during the late-nineteenth century. Rather than functioning as a child-like mediator between the lovers, Martha establishes herself as a friend and equal in every sense of the word. Martha and Sophia's friendship becomes an integral component of Sophia and Harold's marriage itself. At the novel's conclusion, Magruder suggests that the now happy marriage between Sophia and Harold is incomplete without Martha's presence: "[Martha] half crossed the room, and then stood still, transfixed with amazement, till they drew her down between them" (225). Martha and Sophia both lay claim to agency within the text while the reader is privy to a new relation of heterosexual marriage that includes female satisfaction through intimate friendship as a defining element.

The employment of the aesthetic as a mediator for emotion is a narrative strategy that Magruder also employs in her 1896 transatlantically published novel *The Violet* as well. The protagonist of the novel, Violet Bertrand, is employed as a chaperone for young Louie Wendell, whose guardian is her older cousin Jerome Pembroke. Violet was married before she became a much sought-after chaperone, though the details of her unhappy marriage are a well-guarded secret throughout almost the entirety of the novel. Violet makes no secret about her distaste for marriage as an institution, however, and she is content to remain Louie's most-trusted friend and adviser. Jerome Pembroke is intrigued by the mysterious Violet and

the central conflict of the novel revolves around Jerome's attempts at professing his seemingly unrequited love in a respectful manner that will allow Violet to overcome her disdain for marriage while still retaining her sense of independence. During a particularly interesting scene, Jerome overhears Violet singing in another room, and when he finds her he charges in and exclaims "I have been thwarted long enough, and I am going to have things exactly my own way. Mrs. Bertrand, you are to sing me a song while I sit here, and listen, and be happy" (*The Violet* 91-2). He further demands "You will not refuse" (92). Violet, in her eagerness to please Louie, sits with a guitar and sings the words to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "A Man's Requirements" to the melody of an unnamed Russian song. The melodic poem positions men as fickle and unable to love longer than "half a year" (94). Jerome is incensed by the conflicting emotions that the song has aroused in him. The narrator points out during the song that he wonders "[could] a picture of a man's longing in love be more deliciously put?" and that he regards Violet's voice in conjunction with this beautiful melody as "perfection" (94). During the last verse, however, the joke about the fickle nature of men becomes clear and Jerome erupts in anger. He claims "What an abominable song!...what a distinct meanness on your [Violet's] part!" (95). Violet and Louie proceed to laugh at him and cuddle together on the couch and profess their love for each other in spite of his protest. When Jerome asks the women "where do I come in?", Violet responds "You don't come in at all. You stay out!" (97). Jerome had barged in, uninvited, into the intimate space that exists between these two women and because of his social position of privilege he is confused by his new position as the object of ridicule.

Magruder's deployment of Barrett Browning's poetry also suggests that Violet is asking to be loved as an equal above all else: "Love me in full being" (Browning I.IV). This urge

toward gender equality in relationships is a common theme present in most of Magruder's novels and short stories, and *The Violet* is no exception. However, Magruder's novels also advocate for a woman's happiness within the domestic realm rather than in her employment or in her studies, as was beginning to seem like a tangible option during the time. It is these two seemingly contradictory impulses which lead me to suggest that Magruder's novels



Figure 1 "The Gibson Girl." Minneapolis College of Art and Design Collection.

propose a type of common-ground compromise that was quite popular with readers from many different class backgrounds. During this period there was an astonishing amount of debate surrounding the 'New Woman': what did she look like?; what were her hobbies?; could she every truly be happy in marriage, or did she cease to exist once she married? These questions were debated and answered within the periodical press of the time with cartoons and illustrations playing a large role in the debate surrounding the new expression of femininity. I

would argue that Magruder's novels draw from this visual discourse and participate directly in it through the incorporation of illustrations by Gibson. Drawings of Gibson's iconic "Gibson Girl" seemed to offer an answer to these questions in a generalized and idealized visual approximation of the modern American woman (Figure 1). The Gibson Girl was portrayed as a modern woman who was frequently surrounded by books, played golf, often appeared in roles that were traditionally thought of as those belonging to men – such as a preacher in one instance – and above all she was portrayed as beautiful and open to new

experiences. She seemed to embody the positive cultural values that were associated with the New Woman and with modernity itself. Charles Dana Gibson once claimed in a 1905 *New York Times* interview that his creation, the iconic Gibson Girl, was “dead. – I mean married,” not so subtly suggesting that New Woman ideology was thought to be incompatible with marriage (Griffith 4). Gibson himself had found acclaim through his infamous depictions of the New Woman, and his work made him into a household name when *Life* magazine began publishing at least one drawing of a Gibson Girl in each issue after 1895. Angelika Köhler claims that the “Gibson Girl seemed to express the changes in the traditional image of American women that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century,” which would account for her immense popularity in America and abroad (161). She seemed to signal a new social movement that was on the horizon for women – and for men by logical extension.

The popularity of the Gibson Girl in itself suggests that men were optimistic about embracing new social roles as well; gendered roles for women could not change at all if men were not willing, or interested, in also altering their roles even ever so slightly. Despite my decidedly more optimistic reading of the popularity of the Gibson Girl, Köhler brings up an excellent argument however when she claims “the Gibson Girl can hardly stand the claim of emancipated femininity” (163). The Gibson Girl paradoxically embodies the image of female empowerment, and yet she is created with the male gaze in mind (and very much subjected to it), and as a result, there is an unresolved ambiguity surrounding the cultural work performed by this image of feminine gender expression. Köhler suggests that this very ambiguity is what made the Gibson Girl so popular, and I would argue that Magruder’s novels participate in a similar endeavor. By writing her female characters as self-sufficient, empowered (and

typically employed) women, Magruder attempts to engage with the socially palatable traits ascribed to the New Woman. But by reinscribing the domestic realm as the real seat of happiness and emotional fulfillment for women, Magruder suggests that her characters, and readers, can have it both ways: a more egalitarian marriage and participation in the public sphere do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Magruder's heroines represent a type of transition between the previous generation's "Girl of the Period" and the "New Woman," and Magruder offers up the female artist as an important cultural mediator between isolation in the private sphere and collective engagement with an active public life. In this way, we see a cautious optimism for change while still desiring acceptance, and Magruder's novels offer this form of comfortable rebellion as a realistic option for her readers. Magruder's fiction and Gibson's illustrations both perform the cultural work of reaching back in a nostalgic manner while simultaneously looking forward to an unrealized, more egalitarian future. Magruder is careful to write her heroines in a manner that would appeal to real working- and middle-class women who might agree with the larger aims of the latest women's movement, but who may be frightened by the characterization (caricature) of the New Woman that was popular in satirical magazines such as *Punch*, and in the popular press.

The *Punch* cartoons which were published originally in England that depicted the New Woman were hardly ever flattering in nature. According to Talia Scaffer, "when people wrote and spoke about the 'New Woman' in the 1890s, they were usually referring to a very different figure: the unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon ready to overturn the world. The 'New Woman' was a comic fictional figure composed of *Punch* cartoons, much-vilified novels, and ominous warnings in popular articles" (39). Gibson's American drawings suggest

a much more affectionate relation to the New Woman, and despite Magruder's penchant for British literature and culture, her own representation of the New Woman is informed by the positive social and cultural attributes of a changing expression of femininity. Magruder's novels and Gibson's illustrations work to reposition the New Woman as an asset rather than a liability, and through this type of popular media collaboration it is possible that New Woman ideology was able to make headway with a wider audience.



STRUCK A CHORD AND BEGAN.

Figure 2 Gibson, Charles Dana. "Struck a Chord and Began."

When narrative and illustration are combined with one another, the collaborative text that emerges begins to function in an interesting manner in regard to the implied reader as well. This implied reader must be initiated in order to understand the textual gestures that signal an invite into this intimate public. At this point, the potential for transcending socially problematic conditions of female embodiment are experimented with, and the characters use these moments as guideposts which point them toward a hopeful space of belonging. To return to the scene when Jerome demands that Violet sing, another layer of meaning is added when one considers the accompanying illustration by Gibson (Figure 2). In this illustration Louie listens to Violet's song, but her gaze is fixed on her cousin Jerome's face. Jerome gazes intently at Violet, his face is turned from the viewer, as is the majority of his body disconnecting him physically from the viewer's gaze. Violet herself sits with her guitar singing outward, seemingly, to the reader. It

is important to note that this outreach occurs at a point in the novel when Violet has just been ordered, against her will, to entertain a man for his own pleasure while he disregards her wishes, and after this decidedly intrusive interaction, the women immediately reify their bond with one another:

Louie "jumped up and threw herself on the lounge beside her friend and catching her shoulders began to shake her, bobbing her own head down to give her a kiss between each shake...'[Violet] keeps up one eternal pretense that she is not the dearest, the sweetest, the most bewitching and the most beautiful thing that ever lived.' [Violet replies] 'She admits herself the next thing to it, however...for if she isn't, you are!'"

*(The Violet 96-7).*

In the accompanying illustration, Violet gazes up from the page at the reader – who is most likely another middle-class woman who is familiar with having her needs or wishes brushed aside at the whim of a man – with what appears to be a look of understanding; a look of camaraderie. This plaintive gaze seems to suggest a shared experience between the character and the implied reader, and this is arguably the most powerful moment in the text precisely because of this aesthetic collaboration between Magruder and Gibson. An intimate public is revealed which also provides readers with a space where they can find intimate solace in collectivity, even if that collectivity remains confined to the aesthetic realm and would not be regarded favorably within the dominant culture.

The inclusion of a popular poem set to music adds another element of aesthetic contact between the reader and the text, suggesting an attempt on Magruder's part to add an

additional auditory narrative to the novel as well. Though, admittedly, this attempt is not wholly successful due to the decision to set the poem to an unnamed melody: "Added to [Violet's recitation of Browning's poem], the melody – that exquisite one from the Russian – was soothing, stimulating, delicious" (*The Violet* 93).<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of a distinct melodic element does suggest, however, that Magruder made an attempt at writing a New Woman *künstlerroman*, a genre so common at the end of the century that many critics have called it the "quintessential New Woman narrative" (Heller 141). This combination of text, music, and illustration ultimately repositions the female artist as an integral mediator of culture with the potential to alter the social for the benefit of women. I would further argue that this moment of textual transcendence is a deliberate attempt to draw the reader into this intimate public that openly suggests that both egalitarian romantic engagement and fulfilling social agency are possible for women.

The intersectional realities of women's lives complicates the way that participation and visibility within this intimate public operates. For example, there is virtually no chance at all that a black woman at the end of the century would have had access to or been hailed into this intimate public due to the racist ideologies that were present in America and England at the conclusion of the nineteenth century. Moreover, if she did have access, it is very unlikely that she would identify with these narratives of sentimental romance and supposedly shared female experience because of the dynamics of institutionalized racism and class privilege. This is especially applicable to Magruder's writings, since Magruder herself was ambivalent when it came to dismantling the institution of slavery in America, and her novels are peppered with derogatory names for African Americans. While I do think Berlant's concept

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<sup>5</sup> It is possible that Magruder alludes to Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* (1870), or his opera *Eugene Onegin* (1879), though there is no textual evidence to suggest a specific composer or melody.

of a generalized intimate public is theoretically astute and productive, I also don't want to suggest that there is some sort of generalized experience among all women, or even the more problematic idea of a *universal* female experience. This sort of critical framework may be theoretically interesting, but as we shall see, this intimate public does have its own hierarchies of visibility and inclusion which privileges white, middle-class, sexually normative female subjects.

Within this wider transatlantic affect world, queer narratives are present, but they are



"THE BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN . . . HAD STEPPED BACK FROM HER EASEL." (SEE PAGE 3.)

Figure 3 Gibson, C.D. "The beautiful young woman ... had stepped back from her easel." *The Princess Sonia* frontispiece.

heavily coded and cloaked in aesthetic metaphor, and Magruder's novels are no exception. However, it is Gibson's illustrations rather than Magruder's writing which does the majority of the work that would contribute to a straightforward queer reading of *The Princess Sonia*. The novel includes four illustrations that could be considered as possible aesthetic contact points for queer subjects. In each drawing the women's faces are obscured by shadow, a technique seldom used by Gibson before or after the publication of this novel, and in three of the illustrations the women are pictured holding each other close – in one case

the women are dancing together. Interestingly, these drawings do not seem to be created with the male gaze in mind: the women wear ill-fitting bedclothes (in most cases), and the women hold each other so closely that both their faces and body shapes are obscured. This is an uncommon theme in Gibson's work, and in his illustrations for Magruder as well. At the beginning of *The Princess Sonia*, the reader is presented with the image of a typical Gibson

Girl (figure 3). This drawing features a young woman who wears clothing that features a tightly belted waist to draw attention to her figure and she is rendered in action, working with her craft. This is a typical drawing of one of Gibson's New Women.

In contrast, let us consider the drawing of Sophia and Martha dancing together (figure 4). Sophia's face is obscured by shadow and she gazes at Martha's face, which is totally hidden from the viewer, but it is apparent that they are locked into an intimate gaze with one another. Their bodies are obscured by their clothing and shadow, and Sophia's hands which are clasped behind Martha's neck lack detail, and give the impression that they are in fact blending together. This image does not seem to be created with the male gaze in mind, despite the fact that the artist himself is male-identified. I would argue that these images of intimacy between female subjects function as aesthetic contact points for women that experience queer longings and desires, and that sexually non-normative women were functioning within this intimate public dominated by white, middle-class women. The inclusion of these images in mass-market print culture reveal the queer counternarratives present in Magruder's work, and point to an optimistic yearning for inclusion and representation within the dominant culture on the part of sexually non-normative subjects.

This optimistic yearning was easily harnessed by publishers in order to gain profit from these female readers while they simultaneously began using labor practices that directly impacted print workers negatively, male and female alike. The end of the century saw the rise of industry as it pertained to publishing practices, and with it the wider availability of



Figure 4 Gibson, C.D. "It will be quite safe, I see." *The Princess Sonia* 31.

texts for readers to choose from. The transatlantic publication of sentimental novels written by women became a more common practice, launching these works into a more lucrative market where the exchange of ideas about *the woman question* could be taken up by lesser known female authors and read widely in an expanded marketplace. Though Magruder's sentimental novels do not expressly comment on capitalism and its accompanying social implications for women, predatory capitalist publishing practices – such as flagrant abuses of international copyright and the rise of industrial publishing practices and working conditions – did allow for a wider readership of women in both America and England. This newfound, expanded audience now had access to more hopeful narratives of female empowerment, though this access was ironically ushered in by the very social ideology that worked to actively keep women confined to the domestic sphere. Magruder's novels work to initiate readers into an intimate public with one another where they could find collective solace in their solitary lives, and in the process they sowed the seeds of a quiet rebellion that would come to fruition in the twentieth century.

Chapter Three: "You came at dusk to find me": The Shadow of Queer Longing in Amy  
Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*

Amy Levy's first novel *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) tells the story of the four Lorimer sisters – Frances, Gertrude, Lucy, and Phyllis – who decide to open a photography studio after the death of their father. The enterprising young women begin to carve out a living for themselves in their London Baker Street studio and the women themselves are easily identifiable as examples of industrious New Women. These self-sufficient sisters are representative of a new class of women who are middle-class, but who also choose to make their living by working. Deborah Nord Epstein claims that in the late-nineteenth century these types of young "middle-class women represented a moment of transition in the history of women's communities: they attempted to live outside of the sphere of the family but chose not to enter into those alternative domestic structures created by like-minded women. Although they did not form residential communities in the way that some teachers, nurses, and settlement house workers did, they nevertheless depended on a loosely organized community, or network, of other unmarried women in whom they saw their own ambitions reflected and affirmed" (733). Frances, called Fanny by her three youngest sisters, describes her younger "strong-minded" sisters as "creatures emancipated from the ordinary conventions of their sex", and each sister pushes at the boundaries of normative gender conventions in her own unique way (Levy 99): Lucy throws herself into her work to block out her sadness after the seeming death of her fiancé, Phyllis has a sexual liaison with a man whom she knows to be married, and Gertrude works as a commercial photographer who often goes to jobs without a chaperone. In this admittedly hard to pin down little novel that is about the four young Lorimer sisters and their commercial photography studio, an occupation that was

considered inappropriate for women at the time, the reader is rarely given descriptions or glimpses of the photographs that they take and develop to earn their living, in contrast to the literal illustrations that were found in Magruder's novels. Levy's novel is more concerned with the internal life of what would now most likely be thought of as the objects of photography such as the streets of London, the social relations of the sisters, and artwork that is displayed in galleries. As a result, the thought processes of the characters, mainly Gertrude, are elevated above the arrangement of bodies in a literal image, and this returns metaphorical longing to the body without over-determining the importance of what that body may look like to a casual observer or reader. It could be argued that Levy's technical ability as a writer is superior to Magruder's, which could account for this difference. But I would argue that Levy's novel participates in an aesthetic which is actually closer to Chopin's, as discussed in chapter one. By utilizing photographic discourse, Levy repositions literary representation as the site of affective interaction for the readers of the intimate public, and in the process she allows for a wider affective identification with the Lorimer sisters.

In *The Romance of a Shop* Levy positions the photographer and her emotional development as the subject of narrative study rather than as a marginal figure, which was a common Victorian representation of the photographer in fiction, and particularly in works of realism. Susan Shelangoskie argues that this shift from object to subject was more common in short works of fiction that center around a domestic plot, as *The Romance of a Shop* arguably does: "in a number of short fiction texts published in the *fin de siècle* periodical press, photographers are protagonists in their own right" [emphasis Shelangoskie's] (93). "Rather than being marginalized," the fictional photographers that Shelangoskie analyzes are the protagonists of romantic plots themselves, and typically the "authority of these

photographers is derived from their technical proficiency and ability to produce and interpret images" (95). But this is where Levy's first novel makes an interesting departure from the typical discourse of the period: rather than highlighting the photographic process or product in order to create a sympathetic photographer protagonist, the novel privileges Gertrude's gaze independently of her camera or the studio. In the process, Gertrude is invested with artistic and social agency without having to demonstrate the technical proficiency that would have been associated with photography in fiction. Because of this difference, the characters of the novel who are gazed at begin to function as artistic objects themselves, and the novel can be read as a variation of the *künstlerroman* novel. This is indeed a novel of *looking*, arguably sometimes even of voyeurism, and as Gertrude's artistic gaze moves back and forth from picturesque late nineteenth-century London to her relations, the reader is offered a glimpse into the powerful cultural understanding of the difference between the nineteenth-century conception of the photographic image and aesthetic textual representation. I argue that Levy's novel blends these competing cultural conceptions in order to offer a new photographic aesthetic in fiction.

Despite the fact that Levy devotes quite a lot of time in her novel to describing the content of works of art and the emotive responses that those works generate in the characters, the novel also features an interesting approach to the use of light and shadow. This chapter will argue that much like a negative image of a photograph, the interplay of light and shadow become the signals that mark the aesthetic contact points of the novel where a queer subtext is rendered visible, and then developed into a coherent image that could be recognized by the members of the intimate public. Rather than using song or illustration to hail the reader into the intimate public in the manner of Chopin and Magruder, Levy demonstrates her own

authorial technical proficiency by incorporating photographic elements into the overall aesthetic of the novel. At these photographically inspired aesthetic contact points *The Romance of a Shop* foregrounds the intimate relationship between Constance Devonshire, whom I read as a queer character, and Gertrude Lorimer, who is more than likely a heterosexual woman. When Constance is read through this queer lens, it becomes clear that Levy's text destabilizes the shame that would normally be associated with viewing or encountering sexual deviance in print. While Gertrude largely maintains notions of propriety in the novel, Constance's unrequited love is never portrayed as abnormal or shameful. Instead, when she gives up on her proclivities and marries a man, her actions are portrayed as both a consequence of her tendency toward practicality, and as devastating to Gertrude. Levy's representation normalizes what would have been thought of as an abnormal or shameful queer desire at the time. The reader who engages with this intimate public is offered a literary example of the power of their own artistic and potentially queer gaze, and in this representation, the normative performance of everyday queer life becomes a politically powerful site of representation, even though the novel resolves in a fairly normative marriage plot. The alignment of queer life with public performance allows the readers of the intimate public to integrate performative gestures associated with non-normative desire into their own sense of identity, and this effectively paves the way for coded expressions of queer desire to take place outside of the confines of text.

In *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, Nancy Armstrong's decisive study of the relationship between fictional text and photography in the nineteenth century, Armstrong identifies the late nineteenth century as the "moment when modern cultures gave their literate populations an ample supply of images and unstated rules for using them for purposes of

thinking about themselves and their world" (3). Armstrong locates realist fiction as the site of this cultural exchange and negotiation. Arguably, *The Romance of a Shop* and Levy's *Reuben Sachs* both contain elements that we would now associate with a realist novel. Both novels do not shy away from revealing the hardships of working class life to the reader, and both contain plotlines that would normally be associated with the gritty reputation of realism as well. But I would argue that *The Romance of a Shop* is in actuality a carefully constructed critique of realism which attempts to incorporate elements of sentimentality in order to produce a new approach to realism that Levy considered a higher artistic aim. In her scathing critique of American realist authors Henry James and W. D. Howells, Levy claimed that the realist writer "makes us see a great many things, but we should see them better if we could feel them as well" ("The New School of American Fiction" 513). However, being a critique, the novel itself is still defined against the conventions of realism, and this works to once again reinscribe the movement's importance.

The novel also contains within its pages a subtle critique of aestheticism as well, represented in the character of artist Sidney Darrell, the married man who has an illicit affair with the youngest Lorimer sister, Phyllis. Gertrude has a powerful dislike for Darrell almost immediately, and her reaction is an example of both intuitive foreshadowing of the events to come in the novel and an indictment of men who do not take women or their concerns seriously. When Gertrude visits his studio, she says it was "fitted up with all the chaotic splendour which distinguishes the studio of the modern fashionable artist; the spoils of many climes, fruits of many wanderings, being heaped, with more regard to picturesqueness than fitness, in every available nook" (Levy 106). Gertrude associates Darrell's decadent lifestyle and his disregard for social mores with his artwork, and she has trouble finding value in

either the man or his aesthetics. Levy attempts to position her novel somewhere between these two extremes of realism and aestheticism in order to craft a highly relatable and marketable novel. Levy's aesthetic is subtle and distinct, and in this novel the lines between many boundaries are blurred as a result. *The Romance of a Shop* carefully negotiates the space between realism and aestheticism by carefully critiquing the methods of both, destabilizes the social divisions between the middle-classes and the working-classes, and troubles the boundaries of sexual propriety. Even the title itself suggests a blending of two types of novel: *The Romance of a Shop* invokes the romantic novel and the city novel, and Levy attempts to produce a new relation to both.

The novel's penchant for blurring boundaries between social discourses is reflected in its treatment of photographic representation as well. Photographic discourse from the mid-century centered on the debate about whether or not photography was a form of art in itself, or a scientific and technological method that could be used to categorize and observe the natural world. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake claimed in *Quarterly Review*<sup>6</sup> in 1857 that "Mere broad light and shade, with the correctness of general forms and absence of all convention, which are the beautiful conditions of photography, will, when nothing further is attempted, give artistic pleasure of a very high kind; it is only when greater precision and detail are superadded that they eye misses the further truths which should accompany the further finish" (251). Lady Eastlake highlights an idea which now seems commonplace, but during the period was not quite so obvious: there are things that the eye may miss that are rendered more visible in a less than expertly developed photograph, but there are also things that the photograph could never capture without the aid of a highly trained and artistic photographer

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<sup>6</sup> Lady Ealizabeth Eastlake was the first female contributor to *Quarterly Review* , and she herself was a photographer.

who knew how to properly position the subject, such as queerness. Before homosexuality was thought of in terms of a category of identity, there were faint visual cues that could signal queerness that could be conveyed in a staged photograph. For example, violets have long signified lesbianism, and the Victorians too were aware of this connection. Gertrude is a good photographer not because she regards photography as superior type of "seeing," as was also a popular discourse concerning the importance of photography in the Victorian age, but because she has the sensibilities and abilities of an artist. Levy seemed to agree with Lady Eastlake's assessment of the failure of photography to be a true form of art in its own right, and Gertrude's gaze is privileged above the photographic image for the duration of the narrative. Along with this elevation it is made clear to the reader that Gertrude is developing her artistic gaze and slowly perfecting it. When Gertrude views photographic images that she has taken, they never quite measure up to what she had hoped or imagined during the shoot. In *The Romance of a Shop* it is almost as if the medium obscures the message. Gertrude Lorimer is an artist first, and a photographer by trade, and it is this difference that contributes to the blending of commercial trade and artistic proclivity that is presented in the text.

Gertrude's artistic gaze also contributes to her meaningful connections with the other characters in the novel. There is an element of foreshadowing present when Gertrude meets Lord Watergate, her future husband, while she photographs the body of the late Lady Watergate, and the scene functions on two separate levels that inform one another. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin claims that "It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture" (226). Death-bed photography seems to be one of the sites where one can appreciate the cult value of

photography. These images were meant to be private, and they were ritualistic in nature in the sense that they were thought to play a role in keeping memory alive for the living. As Christian Metz argues, death-bed photography is a type of commodity fetish that signifies both loss and the "protection against loss" (84). When Lord Watergate commissions a death-bed photograph of his wife, he does so in order to have a lasting image that, according to Kate Flint, Victorian society regarded as a material product that was linked to the concept of memory itself. Flint claims "there was close relationship between photography and the material manifestations of mourning and memory in the nineteenth century" and this is most likely the reason Lord Watergate has commissioned the photograph of his dead wife ("Photographic Memory" 93). However, Roland Barthes argues in *Camera Lucida* that photography began to function as a substitute for memory rather than as an integral part of its process in the late-nineteenth century. Levy's text seems to participate in an ideology that reflects Barthes proposal and suggests that photography and memory are connected in the minds of the actors on the scene rather than in the photographic image itself. While Gertrude photographs the former wife of her future husband, her presence as the photographer threatens to become intertwined with Lord Watergate's memory of his deceased wife. Gertrude worries when they meet again at Sidney Darrell's studio that "I only hope...that he will not recognize me. The recollections that the sight of me would summon up could scarcely be pleasant. I have no wish to enact the part of the skeleton at the feast" (Levy 109). While Gertrude fears that Lord Watergate will sadly remember her in relation to his dead wife, the eventual successful conclusion of the romantic plot would suggest that Lord Watergate instead associates Gertrude with the *role* of wife rather than with his former wife's death. This interesting cross-association blurs the two competing cultural conceptions of how

photography functioned in the creation of memory during the period: fetish death-bed photography may indeed function as a form of protection against loss, but I would argue that in *The Romance of a Shop* memory itself is also a type of photographic image that can stand in for the physical photograph itself. Levy's representation offers an interesting challenge to Armstrong's concept of photography's function as a type of *external memory*, and also elevates Gertrude's thought processes above the photographs that she takes to earn a living.

Interestingly, Gertrude's view of the scene is described as if her eye itself is a camera, and the image of Lord Watergate in the room filled with "bright October sunlight" leaves a far greater impression on her than the actual photograph that she takes of Lady Watergate (86). As she gazes at Lord Watergate in the death-bed room, the narrator relays that

"For one brief, but vivid moment, her eyes encountered the glance of two miserable grey eyes, looking out with a sort of dazed wonder from a pale and sunken face. The broad forehead, projecting over the eyes; the fine, but rough-hewn features; the brown hair and beard; the tall, stooping, sinewy figure; these together formed a picture which imprinted itself as by a flash on Gertrude's overwrought consciousness, and was destined not to fade for many days to come" (Levy 87).

When Gertrude once again encounters Lord Watergate, the metaphor of the flash is once again used to signal the memory of their initial meeting: "Then, as by a flash, she saw it all again before her eyes; the dainty room flooded with October sunlight; the dead woman lying there with her golden hair spread on the pillow; the bearded, averted face, and stooping form of the figure that crouched by the window" (108).

Kate Flint claims that *The Romance of a Shop* reflects the cultural conception of memory as a type of photographic process in itself, and I would agree with her assessment. She positions the metaphor of the photographic flash as a process that is akin to the workings of the brain and the way the human mind stores and recalls visual information. She claims "The technology of flash photography – the very shock that it delivers – emphasizes suddenness, surprise, interruption" ("Photographic Memory" paragraph 23). It is worth noting, however, that there is no textual evidence to suggest that the Lorimer sisters used early flash technology which included pyrotechnic developments such as photogen<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the technology of the photographic flash lamp was not developed for commercial use until 1896, and so this reference that Levy makes to the "flash" more than likely referred to the concept of a telegraphic flash rather than a photographic flash. The use of the term "telegraphic flash" also typically referred to the cognitive transmission of information, and Kate Flint too argues that "the language of flash is both the language of revelation and of recollection" (paragraph 22). While Flint connects the flash to interruption, I would argue that the telegraphic flash and its cultural connection to the workings of the mind would arguably make more sense from a historical standpoint. Furthermore, when Levy's metaphorical use of the flash is refigured as an element of memory rather than as one of interruption, these interactions that are signaled by a flash are repositioned as a cognitive process rather than a disturbance. This alignment intertwines romantic exchange with mental processes, and it is possibly the most overt signal that Levy gives to readers of the intimate public. When memory processes are combined with description that is informed by the lighting of the scene, the careful and detailed depiction draws a parallel between Gertrude's

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<sup>7</sup> Invented by John Moule in 1857, photgen was a mixture of antimony sulphide, nitre, and sulphur that was relatively cheap. The results were thought to be too contrasted, though the technology itself was still popular with London portrait photographers.

gaze and a "picture" that can "imprint itself on her consciousness" (*The Romance of a Shop* 87). Gertrude's memory itself is described in technical terms as a type of photographic process, and whenever this initial intimate encounter between the two characters is revisited as a flashback in the novel it is described in these similar photographic terms. This recombines aesthetic –albeit photographic – description with romantic exchange, and the intimate public is essentially given a clue to look for similar description throughout the narrative.

In short, the reason that the intimate moments between Lord Watergate and Gertrude are described using the metaphor of photography is because Levy uses photography as the artistic medium of choice to communicate sentimental romantic familiarity to the reader, especially when the scene is mediated by Gertrude's gaze. The most intimate scenes of the novel are announced subtly by changes in light and shadow as well, and I believe it is in these scenes that a queer narrative is revealed. Armstrong claims that "visibility and invisibility come to us in relative degrees of light and shadow that are technically interchangeable" in the form of a negative image (14). Photography was thought to have the ability to make things visible that were invisible to the naked eye, and I believe Levy draws from this discourse when she creates a queer subtext using the metaphor of photographic image.

Nancy Armstrong claims that "As Victorian photography established the categories of identity – race, class, gender, nation, and so forth – in terms of which virtually all other peoples of the world could be classified, literary realism showed readers how to play the game of modern identity from the position of observers" (26). Identity began to be organized around images earlier in the century, and literature played a vital role in joining what would

later become recognizable visual markers to the people or objects that they were thought to represent after the advent of sociology and other social sciences. By the late-nineteenth century, visual taxonomies of difference began to arise out of the social sciences that would attach visual markers to different types of people, and those markers were eventually folded into a person's identity. Levy's text both participates in and disrupts the solidifying referentiality of images of queerness in the nineteenth century. There are subtle hints throughout *The Romance of a Shop* that could have historically indicated that Constance is not only a frivolous middle-class woman, but is also a potentially queer character. I use the term *queer* in the broadest sense, and I do not want to suggest that I believe Constance Devonshire is a lesbian, or even what we would now think of as bisexual, but that there is a very clearly-drawn element of uncertain homoerotic desire that is connected to her character through visual the descriptors of light and shadow. This aesthetic marking would have been signaled to an observing reader, and in the process these signals worked to solidify what an image of non-normative desire may have looked like during the period. Constance Devonshire, ever the practical socialite, tries to confess to Gertrude that she is disappointed about Frank Jermyn's affections for Lucy. Many would offer this as proof that Constance is not a queer character. But the reason that she cites for her disappointment is not love or attraction, but instead she claims that she is desperately afraid of marrying a man who is not kind to her, or who is just after her family money and class status. She claims "We rich girls always end up with sneaks -- no decent person comes near us" (*The Romance of a Shop* 132). The narrator claims that Gertrude does not want Constance to divulge this secret to her because "[Gertrude] disapproved, generally speaking, of confidences of this kind, considering them bad for both the giver and the receiver; but this particular confidence she

felt to be simply intolerable" (132). It is assumed that Gertrude does not want to hear of Constance's romantic feelings that were directed toward her future brother-in-law, but I would argue that a straightforward heteronormative reading of the relationship between these two women does not take all of the textual evidence into account.

Constance's letter to Gertrude at the beginning of chapter twenty four has never been critically accounted for, yet I would argue that it is one of the most open signals of homoerotic attraction that Levy gives to the reader. Constance writes to Gertrude, "I have a piece of news for you, but somehow it won't come out. Not that it is anything to be ashamed of. The fact is, Gerty, I am going the way of all flesh and am about to be married. Believe me, it is the most sensible course for a woman to take. I hope you will follow my good example" (189). She continues in the letter and writes "Do you remember Sapho's [Levy's spelling] words: 'J'ai tant aimé; j'ai besoin d'être aimée?' ["I have loved so much; I have need to be loved."] Do not let the quotation shock you" (189). I would argue that Constance is not only referring to her disappointment with Frank Jermyn, but that she is also directly referring to an ambiguous homoerotic desire for Gertrude, but that Constance, in all her practical wisdom, sees marriage as the only suitable path that for herself, and for Gertrude. A reading that is informed by this shadowy desire would also make Gertrude's reaction to the letter a bit more understandable: "Gertrude read no further; the thin, closely-written sheet fell from her hand; she sat staring vaguely before her...Conny's letter, with its cheerfulness, partly real, partly affected, hurt her taste, and depressed her rather unreasonably" (190). The aforementioned quote from a character named Sapho specifically comes from Alphonse Daudet's 1884 novel *Sappho*. The connection between Sappho and lesbianism was reaffirmed in the fin de siècle with the latest translation by Henry Thronton Wharton in 1885.

Interestingly, this same quote also appears in Mary F. Robinson's 1886 book of poetry *An Italian Garden: A Book of Songs*. According to Levy's biographer, Linda Hunt Beckman, Mary F. Robinson herself was involved in a long-term romantic relationship with Vernon Lee, and both women were close, personal friends of Amy Levy's.

In order to contextualize and analyze the importance of the quote from Mary F. Robinson, a brief overview of Levy's own homoerotic history will be helpful. It seems as if Levy never particularly tried to hide her own homoerotic desires, and Beckman attributes this to her Jewish identity. She claims that "It may have been harder for Levy to spiritualize her homoerotic feelings [an extremely common strategy employed by queer nineteenth-century women] than it was for the gentile girls because Judaism does not have the spirit/body split so important in Christianity" (31). Beckman does not specifically point to any theological evidence that could support this claim, yet it is the only reason she provides for Levy's seeming refusal to hide her homosexuality from public view. I would argue rather that Levy was so invested in political emancipation for women and in her own intimate public of enlightened and sexually non-normative friends that she simply saw no reason to actively hide her desire. She seems to have bravely built a life for herself that would be compatible with her sexuality by surrounding herself with like-minded women and male friends, including Oscar Wilde. In the last years of her life before her suicide, Beckman believes that Amy Levy was quite in love with Vernon Lee (born Violet Paget), fellow author and critic of aestheticism. In addition to Vernon Lee and (Agnes) Mary F. Robinson, Levy's social circle included the openly homosexual women Dorothy Blomfield (intimate friend and travelling companion of Levy), Berta Thomas, and Helen Zimmern. Zimmern and Thomas often traveled to Florence, Italy together and Beckman claims that Blomfield "too looked to

women for emotional and erotic satisfaction" (133). Blomfield and Levy also shared another common bond that united the two women further: both women at separate times openly declared their love for Vernon Lee in letters, and though both were turned down, they were both encouraged by Lee to maintain their platonic friendship so that she could "keep" each of them "as a devotee" (134).

Despite Lee's over eight-year relationship with Mary Robinson, in 1888 Robinson decided to marry a French Jewish man named James Darmesteter. This news came as a shock to Lee and she wrote to Levy saying that she was "too smashed to see people" in the months before Levy's death (147). I would argue that this relation shows up in a slightly altered form in *The Romance of a Shop* in the form of unrequited, and almost unarticulated, homoerotic desire between Constance and Gertrude, the latter of whom is admittedly a bit uncomfortable with sexual non-normativity in the text when it comes to other characters, such as Phyllis. Levy was aware of Robinson's 1888 decision to marry a man while she was writing *The Romance of a Shop*, and considering Levy's authorial skill it would be quite unlikely that the juxtaposition of this particular quote from her poetry with scene in which an intimate female friend tells another that she is to be married is coincidental.

Furthermore, this ambiguous desire is rendered in a literal way in the text as well. Constance is often depicted as being half in shadow throughout the entirety of the novel, as is Gertrude when they are in close proximity to one another, and this relationship is the only one that is marked by such an aesthetic. This shadow may seem simply coincidental at first glance, but when these shadows and tricks of the light are considered along with the cultural idea that the overexposure of a photograph could render things visible that the human eye would miss, I believe this is a subtle artistic rendering of an overexposed photograph that is

bringing visual information to light that a sexually normative reader would no doubt miss, but that an initiated reader would have considerably less trouble assembling. One obvious clue, aside from the fairly straight-forward Sappho reference, is that when Constance is originally introduced in the narrative, her face is described as "handsome," which was a common marker for suspected lesbians in the nineteenth century according to both Sharon Marcus and Martha Vicinus. But interestingly, Gertrude is described as "dusky" as she stands next to her intertwining the concepts of a common marker of deviant female sexuality with the concept of being in an in-between, shadowy state (*The Romance of a Shop* 61, 62). At one point Constance's tell-tale blush in the presence of both Gertrude and Frank Jermyn is hidden by "the fading light of the December afternoon", and then she is "absorbed in furtive contemplation of a light that glimmered in a window above the auctioneer's shop" (89, 91). Constance and Gertrude are described in terms that could also be associated with an over- or under-exposed photograph, rendering the visual picture of the two of them together as a liminal image in itself. The interplay of light and shadow only occur in relation to Constance Devonshire and Gertrude in the text, and I would argue that this is a particularly subtle way that Levy signals verbally undefined homoerotic attraction in the novel.

To return to the previous discussion of the allusion to a Mary F. Robinson poem in the beginning of the chapter that features Constance's letter, I must add that the chapter itself is begun with an epithet from another Mary F. Robinson poem, "Love Without Wings." The very structure of this lyric poem is written in Sapphic verse, which in the nineteenth century could have suggested homoeroticism as well. The following is the selection that Levy chose to place in a prominent position as an epithet, which is a space that she typically reserves for canonical English authors such as Shakespeare, Byron, and Tennyson:

We sat when shadows darken,  
 And let the shadows be;  
 Each was soul to hearken,  
 Devoid of eyes to see.

You came at dusk to find me;  
 I knew you well enough....  
 Oh, Lights that dazzle and blind me --  
 It is no friend, but Love!

This poem selection comes from a larger poem which tellingly speaks of a lost love that may have never actually existed. The speaker of the poem is drawn "back to life" by a lover who sits in the shadows and will "let the shadows be" with them (Robinson 61). This selection in *The Romance of a Shop* is too marked by *shadows*, and *dusk*, and *Lights that dazzle and blind* much in the way that Constance is consistently described in the novel. And most tellingly, the speaker claims "And you to me never said a word,/ Nor I a single word to you./ And yet, how sweet a thing was heard,/ Resolved, abandoned by us two!..." "Only at the dead of night/ I smile a little, softly dreaming of you / Until the dawn is bright" (63). Margaret Reynolds claims that in Sappho's poetry "The evocation of the night, the delicate suggestiveness of the enveloping dark and the wistful lustfulness of Sappho's 'lying alone' have found their way into many works by English poets" and that these descriptors are bolstered by the 1885 translation of Sappho (24). After Constance sees Gertrude and Lord Watergate speaking together for the first time she feigns happiness in the presence of Gertrude. But then her happiness quickly "faded" once she was alone and she "lay awake sobbing with mingled

feelings half through the night" much like in Sappho's verse and Mary F. Robinson's poem (184). The narrator then relays that Constance thought "'I am going to lose her too.' For she remembered the smile in Gertrude's eyes that afternoon when she had found her standing alone after Lord Watergate's visit; a smile to which she chose to attach meanings which concerned the happiness of neither Frank nor Lucy" (184). I think that Levy intended for this comparison to be made between Sapphic tendencies, Mary F. Robinson's biography, and the sexually ambiguous intimate friendship between Constance and Gertrude, and that the juxtaposition of these elements is not coincidental.

In a particularly interesting exchange between the young women, Constance tells Gertrude that she has "taken to sitting in conservatories under pink lamps", and Gertrude responds "I shouldn't play that game, Conny. It never ends well" (157). Kate Flint argues in "The 'hour of pink twilight'" that "the shadowy ambiguities of twilight have an important part to play, albeit a metaphorical one, in the final fifteen years of the nineteenth century: years that constitute a transnational and crucial period in British lesbian history" reaffirming the cultural connection that was forged between shadow and queerness (688-9). Flint argues that these queer encounters most often happen while Gertrude walks her *flâneur* in the streets of London, and I wholeheartedly concur. I would argue that Levy also uses colored, or out of place, lighting to signal queer encounters in *The Romance of a Shop*, both in the streets of London and in domestic space. Consider the following scene:

Letting her work fall into her lap, [Gertrude] leaned in dreamy idleness from the window, looking out into the street, where the afternoon was deepening apace into the evening. A dung-colored haze, thin and transparent, hung in the air, softening

the long perspective of the street. School hours were over, and the Girtonian, her arm swinging like a bell-rope, could be discerned on her way home, a devoted *cortège* of school-girls straggling in her wake. From the corner of the street floated up the cries of the newspaper boys, mingling with the clatter of omnibus wheels.

An empty hansom cab crawled slowly by. Gertrude noticed that it had violet lamps instead of red ones (*The Romance of a Shop* 161).

This scene is marked by an in-betweenness: the hour is twilight, the air is hazy softening the visual image for the reader, and the scene also reaffirms the connection between the Victorian *artistic* photographic technique of blurring the field of vision with Gertrude's scopic gaze. In this scene Levy attempts to intertwine homoerotic attraction with the visual descriptor of violet lighting. This reading is difficult to determine without considering Levy's biography though. In Levy's teenage years when she attended Brighton High School for Girls (founded in 1871 by feminists Maria and Emily Shirreff ), Levy wrote a letter to her sister Katie in which she openly discussed her schoolgirl crush on headmistress Edith Creak -- perhaps "the Girtonian" of *The Romance of a Shop*:

“Today that blessed woman [Edith Creak] mounted guard for 4 hours – so you may imagine my eyes were not bent solely on my paper – She did look sweet – just working mathematics contentedly to Herself. She has flung out minute crumbs of sweetness lately to her to her wormy adorer, who bagged a

divine passion-inspiring – whenever-I-think-of-it – embrace  
 today at the sanctum door. Frankly I'm more in love with her  
 than ever – isn't it grim?" ("Letters from Amy Levy" 224).

This open declaration of homoerotic attraction would become a life-long trait of Levy's. The "devoted *cortège* of school-girls straggling in [the Girtonian's] wake" are reminiscent of Levy's own admitted school-girl crush, and when this scene is framed by Gertrude's gaze, it is apparent that she does not attach a moralizing overtone to her observations. When the non-judgmental treatment of Constance and Gertrude's intimate affections is combined with the similarly positive consideration of this twilight scene that she observes, Levy's text divorced shame from non-normative desire, and actually repositions homoeroticism as both a normal and everyday occurrence between women.

When Phyllis dies, however, Gertrude and Constance both give up their experimentation with homoerotic desire in favor of a platonic, yet still intimate friendship. Phyllis' death is tied in Gertrude's mind directly to sexual non-normativity, and I believe her passing is ultimately what causes the women to turn away from all of their experimentation: it is directly after this that everyone is married off, and the photography studio is closed. At Phyllis' funeral, the narrator says that to "Gertrude all the sickening details of the little pageant were as the shadows of a nightmare. Standing rigid as a statue by the open grave, she was aware of nothing but the sweet, stifling fragrance of tuberose, which seemed to have detached itself from, and prevailed over, the softer scents of rose and violet, and to float up from the flower covered coffin" (*The Romance of a Shop* 180). In the Victorian language of flowers, tuberose signified dangerous pleasures and Phyllis wears them throughout the novel. As mentioned previously, violets also carried the cultural connotation of lesbianism in

Victorian times as well. In this scene, the "stifling" scent associated with dangerous pleasures overpowers the "softer" scent of violet, and this is the moment when Gertrude makes the decision to put an end to her own experimentation. Soon after the funeral in the very next scene of the novel, Constance and Gertrude sit by the window on a "bleak January afternoon" (180). The aesthetic marking of shadow and light disappears from the narrative at this point, and the narrator writes "How strange it seemed, after all that had happened, to be sitting here quietly, talking about over-exposed negatives, premiums, and apprentices...Looking out into the familiar street, with its teeming memories of a vivid life now quenched for ever, she said to herself, as Gertrude had often said: 'It is not possible'" (181). It is unclear which woman speaks these telling words, and it is also grammatically unclear what exactly these words refer to. Considering the references to "over-exposed negatives", which I argue is a metaphor for homoerotic attraction, and "looking out into the street", which Kate Flint has argued is a space where queer encounters take place, I would suggest that this is the moment in the text where the women subtly decide to alter the workings of their relationship in favor of a platonic, yet still idealized love.

Despite what a modern reader might interpret as the less-than hopeful ending of the homoerotic coupling in *The Romance of a Shop*, the epilogue of Levy's novel does suggest that all is well with Constance Devonshire and the Lorimer women. Frances is happily married; Lucy successfully combines public acclaim with domestic contentment by having children with Frank Jermyn but still continues in her now award winning photographic pursuits; Gertrude and Constance both marry, and despite the fact that their husbands do not "hit it off", they still maintain their intimate friendship (193). Levy's careful and subtle construction of the visual descriptors of queerness helped to intertwine private life with

public life, and in the process provided members of the intimate public with a manual of sorts for finding one another out in the real world. During the early twentieth century queerness began to be signaled to others by certain items of clothing and performative gestures, and Levy's first novel is a precursor and an aid in that cultural shift. Levy's depiction of homoerotic longing between intimate friends and queer encounters on the streets of London offers a type of guide for members of the initiated intimate public that would function as a signpost on the path that eventually led to queer performativity as a way of life in the twentieth century.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the introduction and the last three chapters, I have argued that an alternative discourse of homoerotic attraction between women is present in the selected writings of Kate Chopin, Julia Magruder, and Amy Levy at the fin de siècle. These queer narratives materialize at aesthetic contact points which are signaled by descriptions of art, music, and scenes which include visual descriptions informed by photography. Within these descriptions, readers are hailed into an intimate public with one another, and a community for potentially queer readers is created that offers a safe space of belonging in the larger public sphere. Nancy Armstrong claims that fiction, and specifically realism, helped to establish representational images that were "identical to real things and people before readers actually began to look that way to one another and live within such stereotypes" (3). In other words, fiction in the late-nineteenth century was unwittingly participating in a politics of difference that would eventually lead to the visual differentiation of certain groups of people. I argued that this identification was not simply confined to realist fiction, and that these narratives are also present in aesthetic works and women's sentimental culture as well. This narrative technique is undoubtedly present in many other works and literary movements as well. Mainly, I argued that these female-identified authors used this type of queer *künstlerroman* novel to amplify visual cues that could signal queer identity to other non-normative subjects. In the process, a living queer aesthetic that could be freed from the confines of text was born that would eventually become fashionable in the 1920s, such as in the pages of 1924 British *Vogue*, and in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).

I would like to suggest a type of a thematic and aesthetic lineage between the novels that I have studied and Hall's infamously heartbreaking lesbian text. I would argue that this

type of lineage is quite valuable to the history of queer literature and lives. Due to the necessarily coded aesthetics of queer interactions within texts and the cultural erasure of queer possibilities, queer literary history has proved to be a fleeting endeavor. The lineage of queer literature is not frequently taken up as a larger project, but has instead mainly focused on elevating individual texts and authors as singular examples in order to *prove* that queerness existed. This urge to reclaim individual authors and texts, while productive, has led to a type of scholarly tokenism which positions queer writers and texts as a type of deviation from the norm rather than a dominant type of literary project in its own right that was taken up by heterosexual authors and readers as well. *The Well of Loneliness* itself has been marked as the "first" lesbian novel for this reason. The impulse to look for individual texts that are marked as overtly homosexual has inadvertently discouraged a wider search and analysis. It is my hope that this project has shown that queer discourses of erotic desire between women in the public sphere were happening earlier – and oftener – than the publication of Hall's novel. While the aesthetics in the novels I have studied may have been coded, I believe they were also a main feature of the novels themselves. By highlighting the contributions to this body of literature from heterosexual authors like Kate Chopin and Julia Magruder (who most likely identified as heterosexual), I hope that I have shown that queer desire was not simply the domain of authors who consciously identified as homosexual, like Amy Levy.

Furthermore, those who were interested in affectively engaging in non-normative desire were producing a literature of their own before many literary historians may have supposed. These queer discourses were published in periodical presses and mass-market novels on both sides of the Atlantic, and were often quite financially successful, in contrast to the assumption that queer life was fiercely relegated to the closet and barred from the public

sphere. Rather, I have shown that queer narratives may have been covertly described, but the tools for revealing these narratives were easily accessible to those who were interested in being included. While we may trace the influence and history of realism or aestheticism, queer writing has by its very nature and circumstances resisted historical categorization and linkage. I hope that this thesis has participated in the work of highlighting queer contributions to literary history, and shown that queer women were participating in the resistance of normative ideologies before many scholars have previously thought.

When Amy Levy linked photography to discourses of queer longing in *The Romance of a Shop* she repositioned queer life as a type of artistic performance that could be transferred to the real world. This shift allows for new categorizations of novels whose overall project appears to be overtly political in nature, and the type of analyses present in this thesis provides a framework which can be used to widen the search for these queer aesthetic novels. For example, in light of my findings from the turn of the century, I would be inclined to argue that the queer *künstlerroman* shares a literary lineage with some novels written by Radclyffe Hall's contemporaries: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936). This tradition has extended well into the present day as well. I would argue that Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) is not – as it is typically read – simply a working-class *bildungsroman* which happens to feature a transgender and queer protagonist. Instead, within my critical framework, it can be read as a queer *künstlerroman* novel in which Jess, the novel's transgendered central character, becomes a new type of artist who is learning to navigate the performance of queer identity. The political project of the novel and the aesthetic interactions between the characters cannot be separated. The novel invests the very act of living a queer life with political potential, and the queer

characters, mainly Jess and Ruth, a New York City drag performer, affectively bond and learn about each other through aesthetic contact.

Text and performance become intermingled in *Stone Butch Blues*, and an aesthetic emerges that is intrinsically tied to old wounds that stem from living a queer life in an openly hostile and homophobic public space. The aesthetic realm provides safety and communion for these characters, but relative safety is purchased at the cost of living a life that they choose, and refusing to feel the shame that was associated with queer life. This is inflected in the ambivalent nostalgia described by Jess when narrating her dream life to Ruth: “At night I’d sing about the way life used to be. It would be such a sad song that it would make the grownups nod and the children cry. But I’d sing it every night so that no one would ever confuse nostalgia with wanting to return” (256). While Jess seems to acknowledge the safety that accompanies hiding one’s identity, she also realizes that living a life for others is no way to live at all. Jess articulates an understanding that any queer utopia is problematically founded in shame, loss, and heartbreak, but it is through this varied and individual struggle that community is formed and culture is shifted. Feinberg’s novel reaches nostalgically to the nineteenth century where the aesthetic was figured as a site of queer representation, and in this nod to the past she pushes forward into a utopian space where queer lives are no longer aberrations. Feinberg’s novel too participates in the inherently political, porous, and shifting boundaries that define this queer intimate public, and this is a public that always has and continues to harbor immense political potential.

While many scholars are eulogizing queer theory and claiming that it is “dead” and “over,” I hope that this thesis has shown that there is still much work to be done. By teasing out queer desire between women of this intimate reading public in texts that appear to

participate in reaffirming heterosexuality, new sites of reclamation have emerged. It was my aim to illuminate the contributions of these nineteenth-century authors and their potentially queer reading public in order to connect contemporary queer subjects to a past that we too often feel excluded from, or marginalized within. This thesis participates in what Elizabeth Freeman has called “being warmed by the afterglow of the forgotten” in its “longing for form” (31). A longing for form is a longing for a public in many ways, and these nineteenth-century authors understood and responded to that desire by creating a space for communion within the *künstlerroman* novel. By reclaiming this aesthetic interaction in the nineteenth century, we are able to see that this type of queer discourse is still culturally with us, and that queer subjects are still using the aesthetic realm to negotiate their place of belonging in society.

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