

Alleyn Diesel, contributing editor of ***Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa*** (2011), made the following comments at the launch of the book during June this year.

As we all come together to launch this book here this morning, I want to start by reminding us of some words from the past: “Free at last!” - to use the words of Martin Luther King. OUT at last! Here we are, all us lesbian women (and our friends), and I hope we can all feel the positive effects of that freedom sufficiently also to echo the words of comedian and singer, Billy Connelly: “Gee, but I’m glad to be gay, Hey!”

We are Sappho’s daughters out in Africa. Proud women, out of the closet. Those are good words, which most of us are happy to be associated with, but they only tell part of the story of our journey.

Firstly, they are the words of men, not of women. And that is, unfortunately, part of the problem for women, especially lesbian women. Men have in the past largely been the spokespersons, speaking for all of ‘mankind’, feeling completely comfortable and confident to do the talking, for, and on behalf of, women - assuming, without second thought, that there was no difference in the outlook and opinions, and, even, at times, the experiences, of men and women.

Thus there are not many female gays/lesbians who have spoken for themselves – who have been allowed, and courageous enough in the light of this imposed silence, to speak out about their experiences – their fears of being different, of being attracted to women, the joy of falling in love with a wonderful woman, the terror of discovery, of scorn, dismissal, of being branded as anti-social, sick, a danger to society – a perversion for which a cure must be sought.

Yes, men have also suffered for being branded homosexual – but this is a man’s world, ruled largely by patriarchs who tend to expect women to do what they consider to be appropriate to men’s requirements and needs. So women who turn their backs on men as sexual partners, and refuse to submit to the requirements of a male-dominated society, are perceived as an unacceptable threat to patriarchal norms, to the whole fabric of an ‘ordered’ and secure way of life. Disobedient, aberrant - in need of serious discipline.

So, although lesbians have existed in Western societies throughout the centuries of written history (at least from the 7th century BCE, when Sappho, the ancient Greek, women-identified poet lived on the island of Lesbos – origin of ‘lesbian’), their lives have remained largely invisible, unknown to, or ignored by, historians.

Just as the patriarchal suppression of the position and achievements of women throughout most of history has been disempowering by keeping them hidden, so, too, has the deprivation of knowledge about lesbianism resulted in the separation of lesbians from one another. This means that their contribution to society, as women with an alternative view of the world, has gone unacknowledged. And this has resulted in prohibiting many from forming any positive self-image.

Ignorance of one's past inhibits the ability to learn from experience, and so to make informed decisions about the future. This makes it difficult to summon the motivation to change a pernicious situation – and to claim one's full humanity. Enforced isolation fosters ignorance - the support of others is necessary for emancipation. 'Women together are strong!' we sang – but, as South Africans learnt through years of apartheid, separation is truly disempowering.

Too often, stories involving lesbians have been written, or re-written, to conceal their real interests and motivations, so as to make them more acceptable to mainstream views and values. This has resulted in traditional (usually male) historians deleting details from the stories of women suspected of being lesbian. And it has also encouraged the women, themselves, to adopt a self-censorship, hoping to pass themselves off as 'normal' heterosexual women.

So, until very recently, stories of lesbian women, whether biographical or autobiographical, have usually concealed the nature of their sexuality. Few honest, explicit writings exist which allow us a clear insight into the fears, agonies, secrecy and joys of lesbian lives, providing the kind of understanding which brings an empathetic appreciation of alternative relationships, and their ability to provide enrichment and fulfillment for both partners.

We hope that these stories might help to redress this lack of knowledge.

In general, the only knowledge available of lesbian lives has been of those famous –notorious - women such as Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Mary Renault, Nancy Spain, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Josephine Baker, or of those relatively few women brave enough to write honestly about themselves, for example, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, *Radclyffe Hall (Well of Loneliness)*, Audre Lorde, Mary Daly, Rita Mae Brown, Martina Navratilova, and Ellen DeGeneres.

But, none of these exciting and stimulating figures was South African, leaving a great gap in possible role-models for contemporary local lesbians. Apart from women such as the pop diva Brenda Fassie, Eudy Similane, captain of the South African women's football team, and other activists throughout the country - as well as many unnamed women school teachers - South African lesbians have been bereft of iconic female figures to encourage them in their lonely search for identity.

In general, all our upbringing as girls and young women, urges us to regard men as the objects of sexual interest, and we are surrounded by role-models who encourage us to cultivate our 'femininity' and sexual attractiveness to men. And women who flout these expectations, refusing to define their lives and identity by their relationships with men, are perceived as sinister.

Many stories in this collection tell of how the writers have been mocked for just this kind of behaviour; being accused of wanting to be men; attempting to usurp the power of the male.

So persecution, legislation, being locked up as suffering from mental illness, and in some places, burning at the stake, stoning, and more recently in South Africa, 'corrective rape', have all been viewed as justifiable methods of containing and suppressing such sinful and subversive behaviour.

There is therefore a need for lesbian role-models who are well-adjusted, happy, attractive, professional - and vulnerable - in order to help break down damaging stereotypes, and demonstrate that this is an appropriate and acceptable choice open to women.

Coming to terms with the many implications of a lesbian life-style usually involves much painful and stressful defining and reconstructing of a new identity – one that flies in the face of the clichés and expectations with which young girls have been indoctrinated. Many stories here tell of this kind of experience.

Straight attitudes to lesbians is also something I wish to comment on, briefly - sometimes quite a strange thing to experience. I can really only speak from personal experience, and others might have had somewhat different reactions from friends and others. Apart from some few examples of veiled, but fairly obvious, homophobia, like people rather suddenly seeming reluctant to greet you, or dropping you from their guest lists, all our friends are wonderfully supportive, for which we are truly grateful. Some of our very best friends are straight!

But there's a strange kind of attitude which seems to say of your lesbianism: "This is totally 'cool', no 'prob' at all – you're actually exactly like us." And that's great, in many ways – in many ways we love being like you.

BUT are we, actually, really, exactly like all of the straight people we so happily consort with? We are different!

And the most obvious way we are different is, of course, that we don't sleep with men. We don't, in general, want to sleep with men. And it's not that we have decided, for various reasons, that we have to settle for second best. As in the movie *A Single Man*, George (Colin Firth), who has recently lost his male partner, points out to his woman friend, we haven't found a partner of the same sex who became a 'substitute' for 'the real thing'. Loving a woman, for a lesbian, is the real thing, it's totally great, and we're not waiting for a really wonderful, sensitive man to turn up and sweep us off our feet, so that we can, at last, be 'normal' and experience the real thing, that we've been missing all this time.

The big difference between a group of straight women who get together for an evening of fun (a 'hen' party as they're sometimes called), and a group of lesbians, is that the lesbians are not continually looking over their shoulders to check on where the men are. They are complete in themselves; not waiting for the boys (the 'cocks') to show up and complete the picture.

And so, to end off - despite the great SA Constitution which has decriminalized homosexuality, and forbids discrimination on grounds of sexual preference, there is still a very long way to go – there is no easy walk to freedom before we can feel completely accepted and safe in our day-to-day lives.

As we become more visible, so we seem to attract more anger and hate from certain sectors of our profoundly divided, conservative, and intolerant society – as some of the authors here have so dreadfully realized (and the issue of so-called 'corrective rape' and other homophobic hate-crimes is something in need of urgent attention from govt. and all responsible people – all of us! –cf. Eudy Similane raped and murdered for being lesbian).

And so, easier than it has ever been for many of us to own who we truly are, and who it is that we love, for many this is still profoundly threatening, even life-threatening.

I myself, for all my education and privileged life-style, feel extremely vulnerable for having taken a stand to write my story here. And so I completely understand those who have chosen to remain anonymous and write under a pseudonym in this collection.

But I have the most heart-felt admiration for all the authors, who have so honestly and courageously shared difficult and painful experiences, as well as triumph over adversity, in order to present an empathetic picture of alternative life-styles, challenging all who read these stories to help build a more tolerant, compassionate world for us all.

Alleyn Diesel

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