

WRITING DESIRE: THE LOVE LETTERS OF FRIEDA FRASER AND EDITH  
WILLIAMS

CORRESPONDENCE AND LESBIAN SUBJECTIVITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH  
CENTURY CANADA

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## Abstract

### Writing Desire: The Love Letters of Frieda Fraser and Edith Williams

This dissertation analyzes the intimate relationship produced by and reflected in the written correspondence between Frieda Fraser and Edith Williams, arguably the largest correspondence of its kind in North America. Frieda Fraser was a professor of microbiology at the University of Toronto and Edith Williams was one of the first female veterinarians in Canada. Their correspondence was written from 1924 to 1927 and then intermittently from 1933 to 1943. This dissertation contends that Frieda's and Edith's correspondence was a place wherein the women created a self-defined sexual description that was in dialogue with cultural discourses that denoted the meaning of the modern lesbian. Frieda and Edith referred to themselves as "devoted women," their designation of a sexual subjectivity that marked their differentiation from these discourses. Edith and Frieda arrived upon a unique notion of romantic devotion, shaped alongside an awareness of contemporary depictions of the lesbian in literature, in science, and in the theatre. This dissertation analyzes how two middle-class Canadian women came to live their lives as "devoted women" within a culture that did not recognize, nor mirror their sexual identities. Affected by modernism, Edith's and Frieda's letter-writing produced, enhanced, and helped the women define their desire for one another. Moreover, the women's devoted relationship benefitted their medical careers and their medical careers benefitted their partnership. In relation to family and profession this dissertation asks to what degree was discretion employed in order to preserve their relationship? In focusing on the correspondence, this dissertation is more than an exercise in "finding the lesbians" in Canadian history: it asks "how did the lesbians find themselves?"

### Acknowledgements

When I first met with Donald Fraser, Frieda Fraser's nephew, in the austere Arts and Letters Club to discuss this correspondence that was his aunts' legacy, who could have known the wonderful, interesting, trying, and collaborative journey that lay ahead? And when I began reading the letters of Frieda Fraser and Edith Williams I couldn't put the letters down. I was captivated by their descriptions of their feelings for each other and by the sense of possibility that surrounded their feelings. Each letter continued into the next, into the unfolding story of ordinary, extraordinary life. As I read, I felt myself in uncharted territory, a witness to their optimistic openness to a hoped-for but unknowable future. I got to know these cultured and professional working women in aspects of their lives that were both public and private-- But I did not do this alone. There were those singular people who were there to anchor and challenge me along the way. In this respect, I extend a special appreciation to Kathryn McPherson my thesis supervisor; Marc Stein mentor and committee member; Deidre Bainbridge my life-partner, and to Catherine Martin.

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## Chapter 1

### Writing Desire

#### The Love Letters of Frieda Fraser and Edith Williams

##### Introduction, Methodology, and Literature Review

This dissertation analyzes the intimate relationship produced by and reflected in the written correspondence between Dr. Frieda Fraser and Dr. Edith Bickerton Williams. Even though the dissertation employs some biographical information, it is not a biography of either woman. It is, rather, a biography of a relationship. This project uses the letters of these two Canadian women to examine the development of same-sex sexual identities in the context of a “devoted” relationship. In keeping the Fraser/Williams correspondence as its frame, the dissertation is more than just an exercise in “finding the lesbians” in Canadian history: it asks “how did the lesbians find themselves?”

The dissertation asks two sets of questions. First, what was the process through which Frieda and Edith came to recognize and express their desire for each other? By analyzing their correspondence, the dissertation examines how the act of letter-writing produced and reflected the women’s love for each other. Second, the dissertation asks what were the historically-specific factors that influenced how Edith and Frieda named themselves “devoted women.” How did the women’s engagement with modern culture in the 1920s, their careers as medical professionals, and their relations with friends and family inform their sexual identities and their intimate relationship?

To answer these questions, the dissertation relies primarily on the letters written

between Edith and Frieda. The Fraser/Williams correspondence was written from 1924 to 1927 and then from 1933 to 1943. Fraser was a professor of microbiology at the University of Toronto. Williams, after working for numerous years as a clerk and then as the owner of a small farm, enrolled in Veterinary Medicine at Guelph University and became one of the first women veterinarians in North America. The women were born in 1899, met as university students in 1918, and began corresponding when Frieda moved to New York to begin her medical internship. The greater part of this dissertation is focused on the letters written during the years from 1924 to 1927, when Frieda and Edith wrote almost daily. During these years, Edith was in London, England, while Frieda was completing her medical training in New York and Philadelphia. The last section of this project looks at the period from 1927 to 1943, during which time there was considerably less correspondence. Throughout these years Frieda wrote from Toronto to Edith, who answered first from her farm in Aurora and after 1937 from Guelph and then Montreal. In the 1930s, the women spent most weekends and free time together in Toronto. The correspondence ended when Edith and Frieda finally established a permanent residence in Toronto together in 1941.

The correspondence is housed at the University of Toronto Archives and was deposited shortly after Fraser's death in 1994. The personal correspondence was a closed collection but Harold Averhill, archivist at the University of Toronto and archivist of the Fraser family personal records, believed I would be a suitable historian to research the collection and directed me to approach the Fraser family for access. With permission from the Fraser family, I began research in 1997, using the collection as the basis for my Master's Major Research Paper. The correspondence proved to be an extremely rich

source deserving of much more attention and I proposed its use for my doctoral dissertation.

This correspondence is unique in a number of ways. It is between two women lovers, it is Canadian and it is extensive. With almost a thousand letters, the correspondence is one of the largest known collections detailing the experiences of women's same-sex sexuality in early twentieth century North America. Frieda and Edith were well educated and wrote eloquently. Thus the letters offer well-written personal insights into a wide variety of challenges facing single white women of the middle class, including women who chose other women as life partners. Moreover, both sides of the correspondence have been preserved, allowing access to dialogue between the two women.

### **Biographies of Frieda Fraser and Edith Williams**

Frieda Helen Fraser was born to William Henry Fraser and Hellene Zahn in Toronto on August 30, 1899. Her father, William Henry Fraser, born in 1853, was from Bond Head, Ontario. He earned his B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1880 and spent several years as a lecturer at Upper Canada College. In 1883, he and Hellene were married. Four years later, William Fraser was appointed lecturer in Italian and Spanish at the University of Toronto. In 1901, he was appointed a full professor. Frieda's father was a prolific writer of textbooks and his French and German texts were used in schools in Ontario for more than two generations. He died in York Mills in December 1916. Hellene died of a heart attack twenty years later in 1936. In addition to Frieda, the Frasers had two sons, Donald Thomas and William Kaspar, who were older than Frieda. Frieda's oldest brother Donald, as suggested by the correspondence, had an important role in

Frieda's life, while Frieda's second brother was rarely mentioned.

In 1912, when Frieda was three, her brother Donald graduated from the University of Toronto with his B.A. In 1915 he earned his M.D., also at the University of Toronto. After active service in World War I, Donald worked in the University's antitoxin laboratory and then was appointed in 1920 to the University of Toronto's Department of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine. A bacteriologist and a proponent of microbiology, Donald was interested in the development of vaccines and antitoxins for tetanus, scarlet fever and whooping cough. He was a participant in the research to improve the production of insulin and a member of the team that perfected the diphtheria toxoid. In 1932, Donald became a full professor, and in 1940, he was appointed head of the Department of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine. Donald died in 1954.

Frieda was educated at her family's Toronto home (at 67 Madison Avenue) until the age of 15. In 1914, she was sent to Havergal College in Toronto for three years. From there she entered University College (part of the University of Toronto) in the fall of 1917. During these years Frieda and Edith first met each other as young adults. In their letters they acknowledged each other as sorority sisters of the Theta sorority. The two women dated their devotion to one another from this period. Frieda graduated with her B.A. in 1922 and then undertook medical training, graduating with her M.D. in 1925. Frieda began her internship in the summer of 1925 at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. When the New York Hospital was forced to close for two years in 1926, Frieda continued her residency at the Henry Phipps Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. There she completed her training with a specialization in chest diseases under Dr. Muriel McPhedran. In 1928, Frieda returned to Toronto and accepted the



positions of demonstrator in the Department of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine in the School of Hygiene and research associate in the Connaught Laboratories, where her brother Donald had been employed since 1920. Frieda alternated her work between her research at the Connaught and her appointment as a demonstrator in the School of Hygiene. In 1931, Frieda successfully wrote her medical examinations, thereby obtaining her medical license. In 1933 she was promoted to the position of part-time lecturer in the Department of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine and in 1934 she was made a full-time lecturer. She was granted an Assistant Professorship in 1936, after which an Associate Professorship followed a few years later. In 1949, Frieda Fraser was appointed full professor, twenty years after she started her career with the Department of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine.

Like her brother Donald, Frieda trained as bacteriologist and she worked closely with him for much of her career. In 1955, a year after Donald's death, Frieda became involved in a special research project to develop an antigen for tuberculosis. In addition to her work in research, Frieda taught preventative medicine in the Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program for more than thirty years. She retired from the University of Toronto in 1965. In May 1968, she was awarded a life membership in the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons for her loyalty to the College as a member of good standing for 25 consecutive years.

As Edith's letters to Frieda suggest, Frieda was relatively quiet and shy. Her sketches in her correspondence indicate that she was a skilled amateur artist. The correspondence also suggests that Frieda was well acquainted with the French and German languages. Frieda passed away in a nursing home in Burlington, Ontario, on 29

July 1994, shortly after her deteriorating health forced her to leave her beloved farm home in Burlington. She survived her partner Edith by fifteen years.

Edith Bickerton Williams, known as “Bud,” was born in Toronto on 24 June 1899. She had two older sisters, Mary and Betty. Edith acquired the nickname “Bud” ostensibly because her parents had hoped to have a son. Bud was educated until she was fifteen at “Glen Mawr,” a private girls’ school in Toronto. Like Frieda, Edith’s father died before she entered university, but this is where the similarity ends. Bud entered University College as an Arts student in the fall of 1916, but in her second year in 1917 she dropped out. During this time she met and formed a relationship with Frieda. Despite Edith’s break with university life, the two women remained in close contact while Frieda attended the University of Toronto’s Medical School.

In 1925, when Edith was twenty-six, her mother sent her to Britain to live with her aging spinster aunts. The Fraser/Williams correspondence suggests that the purpose of the extended stay was fourfold: to separate Edith from Frieda, to provide companionship for Edith’s aunts, to give Edith a chance of finding employment, and to encourage Edith to find a husband. Subsequently, in Britain and Europe, Edith made connections with other women who formed life partnerships with each other. She also met female political activists. Edith traveled through much of Europe and then found employment and a flat in London. Over the course of these three years, Edith worked in a London bank and then as a clerk in the London office of the Government of Ontario Immigration Department, where she processed the claims of those seeking to immigrate to Ontario.

Edith's letters demonstrated her anguish at her separation from Frieda. To make matters worse, the English climate did not agree with Edith's health and she developed a mild case of tuberculosis. During the two years of their separation, Edith managed two short visits to Frieda. Finally in 1927, Edith ignored her family's entreaties to remain in England and returned to Canada.

From 1927, Edith applied regularly without success for admission to the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph, a small city 62 miles west of Toronto. She had been given a number of acres of Aurora farmland (25 miles north of Toronto) from a wealthy relative, thus prompting her interest in the field. Edith raised poultry for the next ten years while simultaneously spending her weekends in Toronto with Frieda and applying to Veterinary College. In 1937, at the age of thirty-eight, Edith was accepted by the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph. She completed a short veterinary internship in Montreal and returned to Toronto to live with Frieda in 1941. That year, Edith graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph, the second Canadian woman to do so. The following year, she set up a successful practice at St. Clair and Mount Pleasant in Toronto, where she worked until her retirement 13 years later in 1965. In 1959, the two women purchased a home near Edith's Veterinary clinic, on Burlington Crescent. In the mid-1960s they sold their Burlington Crescent home and retired to the Fraser family farmhouse in the city of Burlington. In the last years of their relationship, the two women shared their passion for mountains, animals, gardening, the arts, and the outdoors. They had a regular subscription to the Stratford Theatre and were members of the United Church. At the end of December 1977, Edith suffered a severe stroke. During her temporary recovery the sole representative of the Williams family to visit was Edith's

sister Betty, the only member of her family with whom she was close. After suffering two more strokes Edith died in 1979.<sup>1</sup>

### **Methodology**

In examining the development of this unique same-sex sexual relationship, I approach the Fraser/Williams correspondence in three distinct ways. First, I view the letters as a form of life writing and in this way see the letters as reflecting Edith's and Frieda's worlds, sustaining their relationship, and producing desire. Second, I look at the letters with close regard for patterns, words, and phrases that suggest a consistent way of relating to the world in terms of the women's sexuality. Third, I read the letters with an awareness of my own subjective position and the conventions of the heterosexual romantic narrative.

The Fraser/Williams correspondence is comprised of approximately 825 letters. I read each letter copying out segments of the letters that could hold any possible significance to this project. Each encounter with each letter was fresh, as I was open to what the correspondence offered rather than viewing the correspondence as an object of information retrieval. I cast a wide net, transcribing any and all passages referring to Frieda's and Edith's relationship with each other, to family, to friends, to co-workers, and to acquaintances. I recorded any references to work and profession, to technology and culture, and to health, weight, wellbeing, and future aspirations. Even the smallest detail might prove to be significant. All in all, I transcribed approximately 85-90% of this significant correspondence and I made notes about those parts that were not transcribed. These included detailed references to times of ship's sailings, details of weather, and

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Averhill, Abstract, (1994) Accession B95-0044, Fraser Family Personal Records, University of Toronto Archives, Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

food, to extraneous comments about certain books and plays, and to references to Frieda's mother's health and whereabouts. Suffice it to say, I copied out a great deal and the process was time-consuming—made even more so by the fact that each letter might include numerous references to many areas of life. And there were countless occasions in which I copied out these letters in their entirety. Because the letters had been archived in separate boxes, I wrote out the letters alternating in three-month intervals for each woman. This method, as laborious as it sounds, permitted the dominant themes of the women's correspondence to emerge while retaining the immediate experience of their writing. This process caused me to pay particular attention not only to the content of their communication but also to the individual rhythms of the women's writing, to their writing styles, to the spaces between their words and paragraphs, and to their punctuation. Hand-writing a hand-written correspondence permitted a deeper approach to this scholarly examination of the Fraser/Williams collection of letters.

These letters constitute a form of women's life writing. The fact that the letters were written almost daily, detailing the women's lives, provides an immediacy of experience for the correspondents then and readers today. In other words, it is easy for the reader today to feel as if she is reading almost as the writer is writing. Unlike most memoirs and autobiographies, the letters were written very close to the events described. As literary critic Marlene Kadar notes, in this kind of life writing "the distance is minimized." Kadar challenges previous assumptions regarding distance as the basis of truth and argues for the importance of daily accounts in personal letters.<sup>2</sup> Politically, the use of women's letters to write women's history affirms women's voices as legitimate

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<sup>2</sup> Marlene Kadar, "Whose Life is it Anyway?" in *Essays in Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 157.

sources in historical practice. These letters are particularly important because they offer a much-needed opportunity to learn about the development of women's same-sex sexuality in early twentieth-century Canada. Kadar argues that life-writing is more than just the words on the page. Following Kadar, this dissertation seeks to re-create the narrative of the correspondence, to read the communication between the lines, and to interpret the letters within the historical context in which they were produced.<sup>3</sup>

What I hope to unravel in this dissertation is the process by which Frieda and Edith became more conscious of their sexual selves and the means by which they incorporated this awareness into the material realities of their lives. One of the questions that emerges out of the study of these letters is whether their sexual selves pre-existed the correspondence or whether the correspondence played a role in the production of their sexual identities. I argue in this study that the correspondence played a critical role in the production of Edith's and Frieda's sexual identities, not only in its disclosure. Thus, I believe that the letters were a space in which Frieda's and Edith's sexual identities were developed, shaped, and affirmed in the process of their life-writing. Feminist and queer historians have debated the nature of gender and sexuality – is sexual orientation biologically “essential” (and therefore always present in a society) or is it socially constructed (and therefore not present in some societies)? The desire of one woman for another does not presuppose a subjective sexual identity derived from that desire. I see the letters as both a reflection of desire and a mechanism whereby these two women expressed and developed their identities as “devoted women.” My methodology addresses how the correspondence bridged the reality of Frieda's and Edith's external worlds and the internal reality of their sexual selves. Constant life-writing molds the self

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<sup>3</sup> Kadar, “Whose Life is it Anyway?” 157.

and offers a chance for self-reflection. In this respect, my methodology views life-writing as a resource for illuminating the historical development of Frieda's and Edith's sexual identities.

In considering the dialogue between Frieda and Edith, I pay particular attention to the tension between how the letters were produced and how they were preserved. Today, the actual correspondence rests in two distinct boxes of files, which maintains the state in which they were preserved.<sup>4</sup> One box of files contains the letters written from Edith to Frieda. The second box, under a separate accession number, contains the letters from Frieda to Edith. The letters in the boxes are paper-clipped together in small packets in approximate chronological order. Significantly, the archival allegiance to preserving the letters in the manner in which they were left to the archive renders the conversational threads between Edith and Frieda one-dimensional.

These conversational threads were subject to external rhythms that often disrupted the "back and forth" of the communication. For example, when Edith resided in England, the rhythm of Frieda's and Edith's writing was shaped by the timing of Atlantic crossings. Letters often arrived in packets and the recipient might receive a series of letters written on three or four different days. It seems that Frieda and Edith answered each letter individually, making reference to specifically dated letters, thereby maintaining the thread of a discussion. Once the writer sent a letter, the answer to it could be expected in about two weeks. This process of writing and answering offered Frieda and Edith an illusion of conversation, but it was a conversation that might have had uneven pacing.

For the scholar of the Fraser/Williams correspondence, a similar process is required to establish a narrative from various threads of conversations. In doing so, the

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<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Marsh, archivist at York University Archives, personal communication, 10 March 2002.

scholar must be attentive to the internal order of the correspondence. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich describes this process of unraveling the threads of women's life-writing and re-assembling a narrative as one of the four major stages in the comprehension of women's life-writing. Ulrich encourages historians to untangle the patterns, stating that "there are always far more things going on than one might at first perceive."<sup>5</sup>

I have attempted to construct a narrative using both halves of the correspondence. A critical part of my methodology lies in maintaining awareness that the two halves of the correspondence form a conversation that never existed as such in its original posted form nor in its later archival form. Yet a conversation, nevertheless, was imagined in the minds of Frieda and Edith as they wrote. My objective, employing dated letters and conversational themes, is to interpret the texts in a way that is as close as possible to the narrative suggested in the timeline of the Fraser/Williams correspondence.

A second theoretical influence on my methodological approach relates to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. I assess how the establishment of specific sexual identities, including their revelation and repetition, developed over time. The constancy and reiteration of sexual identity is important, particularly in terms of lesbian life-writing. Butler names this constancy "iterability," in that the performance of one's sexual identity is not a single act or event, but a ritualized repeated production.<sup>6</sup> My study asks how Frieda and Edith "performed" their sexual identities through the language used in their letters. My study privileges the repetition of sexual identity in Edith's and Frieda's language, using their demarcation "devoted women" as the most reiterated term of their sexual subjectivity. The study also analyzes expressions of physical desire. Drawing on

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<sup>5</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Getting Butter from the Duck," an unpublished paper presented at "Women's Writing /Women's Lives Conference" 5 June 2000, University of New England, Portland, ME.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 95.



historian Martha Vicinus's theoretical perspective, which emphasizes that "all categories and definitions [of same-sex relations] must remain provisional," my study interrogates how desire was enacted in the letters. Thus, while I use the term "same-sex sexuality" to acknowledge the historic diversity of sexual subjectivity, I also use the designation "lesbian" to capture the sustained physical and erotic desire that was expressed in the correspondence.<sup>7</sup> Vicinus acknowledges that the use of the words "lesbian" and "same-sex sexuality" highlights the sexual nature of the topic, but also is a linguistic reminder that sex matters, in terms of the relations of the self and the conduct of one's life.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this dissertation pays attention to the fact that women's same-sex sexuality is best understood as sustaining women's lived experience of their world.

The third methodological issue in this analysis concerns my own subjectivity as a researcher and a lesbian in relation to the correspondence. I initially wanted to write about these women because I anticipated that their correspondence would reveal a "triumphant" lesbian relationship. A historical record of a sustained middle-class lesbian relationship validates the narrative of my own relationship. Certainly, one of the things that makes Frieda's and Edith's story appealing to me is that their romance was successful-- the two women, after enduring years of intermittent separation, finally lived "happily ever after." However, I need to ask by what standard is the successful narrative validated? What is supported in the validation? What defines success in this narrative? How is the narrative to be understood in this dissertation?

The very idea of a narrative structure is interwoven with the idea of heteronormativity. According to literary critic Judith Roof, narrative is a means by which

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xxiii.

<sup>8</sup>Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, xxii.

we produce meaning and order. But the very idea of narrative is imbricated with heteronormativity, as Roof states, “because it is through the metaphorical rather than the literal that sexuality inflects all that seems not immediately sexual.”<sup>9</sup> How is the metaphor of sexuality woven into the narrative structure? Specific terms and values that are associated with particular sexualities are associated and given meaning in the structure of a narrative. A narrative is productive on many levels, while narrative’s “reproductive logic” reduces the larger field of sexuality to two categories; one category is productive, while the other is non-productive. Productive or reproductive sexuality becomes metaphorically heterosexual, while non-reproductive sexuality becomes associated with sameness, which becomes metaphorically homosexual. Heterosexuality is literally and metaphorically reproductive and hence valuable. Homosexuality is literally and metaphorically non-reproductive and therefore not as valuable.<sup>10</sup>

As cultural products of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we can only speak, acknowledge, develop, and sustain ourselves in relation to heterosexuality. How is this so? Roof stresses the inter-relationship between culture and narrative, where culture is defined by the story and is also defining the story. Indeed, Roof argues, “It is the metaphorically heterosexual ideology of twentieth century culture that also underwrites the naturalized understanding of the shape and meaning of life.” For Roof, thinking outside of narrative normativity “presents a critical difficulty within a specific already heterosexual ideology.”<sup>11</sup>

Narrative and sexuality are two of the ways that we create meaning for our lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), xxviii.

<sup>10</sup> Roof, xxix.

<sup>11</sup> Roof, xxvii.

Yet at the same time, conventional narrative and sexuality are also two expressions of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity underwrites how we tell the stories of our lives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In twentieth century narratives, homosexualities can only occupy certain positions or play certain roles; homosexuality's very construction is a testament to its partner heterosexuality. Roof notes, "Narrative is a structuralist category even when it is postmodern, or fragmented or presumed missing, even if it is an illusion that compensates for lack or provides a false mastery of what can never be mastered—these defenses exist because narrative is a structural defense against a chaotic world."<sup>12</sup> How is narrative to be understood in this dissertation?

Edith's and Frieda's lives conformed in many ways to heteronormative narrative structures. I initially viewed Edith's and Frieda relationship as a "success" because they fell in love, they wanted children, and they ended up living together for a long time. My approach to Frieda's and Edith's relationship cannot but reflect the politics of the period in which this dissertation was written, which culminated in groundbreaking Canadian legislation legalizing same-sex marriage. To challenge the narrative structure embedded in legal and emotional rights language, in Roof's words, "jeopardizes the sexual system itself, threatening no structure and no narrative in a system that depends upon both." As a legally married Canadian lesbian with two children, I have a political and emotional investment in the success of Frieda and Edith's relationship. Our stories might be lesbian, but they are constructed within heteronormative frameworks. Keeping Roof's arguments in mind, I am aware that Frieda's and Edith's narrative is a product of a heteronormative ideology that organizes all narrative. Frieda's and Edith's story is familiar and has a

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<sup>12</sup> Roof, xxxii.

“heterosexually friendly” shape.<sup>13</sup>

Sally Newman’s “The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee’s Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Lesbian Letters in History” addresses this methodological issue. Her article argues for a non-heteronormative methodological approach in the analysis of the letters of writer Vernon Lee. Newman’s objective is to create an expanded historical space for women who claimed a consciousness of difference that stemmed from their attachment to other women. Not only does Newman interrogate her subject’s sexual subjectivity, she also interrogates her own response to the text as a scholar. In other words, Newman is conscious of her sexual subjectivity as part of her role as interpreter of lesbian letters:

Acknowledging the role of the scholar in constructing meaning from a text also forces attention to those processes whereby meaning is formed through analysis, deduction and interpretation.... In this specific instance, because I am reading for lesbian history—looking for lesbian relationships, desire, romance, and love—I am also implicitly reading for a narrative of romance.<sup>14</sup>

My methodology incorporates Newman’s approach. Like Newman, I question the scholar’s expectations of lesbian desire that might be assessed according to heteronormative standards. My expectations were as follows: lovers meet, lovers get separated, and lovers declare their true desire for one another and then live happily ever after. Thus my methodology incorporates self-reflection regarding my position in relation to the narrative of unfolding sexual love. Roof calls our attention to narrative as heterosexual in structure, stating that “our very understanding of narrative as a primary means to sense and satisfaction depends upon a metaphorically heterosexual dynamic

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<sup>13</sup> Roof, xxxii.

<sup>14</sup> Sally Newman, “The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee’s Failed Sexuality and Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, nos. 1-2 (January/April 2005), 72.

within a reproductive aegis.”<sup>15</sup> Aware of the heteronormative “gaze,” Newman suggests that women’s mundane discussions about money, comfort, and travel to see one another are “routine” discussions that are not regarded as part of the romantic lexicon within the heterosexual narrative. These discussions are not emotionally overt enough, nor productive enough. Newman notes, however, that by paying attention to details beyond the heteronormative narrative, what might be seen as mundane, “routine” conversations between two women can imply, signify, and become an important part of a romantic narrative that is not heterosexual. By widening the scope of “what counts as indicative of desire,” Newman realizes that the frequent mundane scenes written by Lee to her lover are intimacies that are “not counted as such in the heteroimagination and its conventional romance narratives.”<sup>16</sup> When researching the lives of women who loved women in the past, Newman asks scholars to think foundationally about evidence, definition, interpretation, and reading that privilege heterosexuality in scholars’ epistemological assumptions about historical practice.<sup>17</sup>

I needed, therefore, to re-evaluate the correspondence and my expectations to consider the ways that the relationship did not adhere to the heteronormative arc. And there were complications in the Fraser/Williams narrative. Edith and Frieda wrote love letters to each other until Edith’s return to Toronto in 1927. Upon Edith’s return to Toronto, Edith did not live with Frieda according to the romantic ideal they expressed in their letters; Edith continued to live with her mother for several years. Because Frieda and Edith desired so much to live together, the reader is also absorbed and hopeful for the success of the professed romantic narrative. However, there exist two interwoven

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<sup>15</sup> Roof, xxii.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Newman, 74.

trajectories: Frieda's and Edith's intentions as expressed in the letters and the reality of Frieda's and Edith's choices. The trajectory of the correspondence does not follow our heteronormative ideal and the scholar might find this inconsistency problematic. I found myself asking, "What went wrong? Why did the two women NOT live together?" Asking this question imposes a conventional heterosexual romance narrative upon a lesbian text. Like Newman, I had to rethink the ways in which desire between women might surface, despite the weight of heterosexual expectations. Thus, following Newman's example by looking for desire in the letters' everyday rhythms, I re-created a connected narrative of desire that spanned the decades between Frieda's and Edith's early years of overt intimacy and their later years' quotidian discussions.

In conclusion, my methodological approach consists of relying on the correspondence as the foundation of study while paying attention to complications that arise from its structure as a romantic narrative. Using life-writing as a tool of analysis, I view the letters as reflecting Edith's and Frieda's worlds, sustaining their relationship, and producing desire. I read the letters with a close regard for repetitions of patterns, words, and phrases that affirm a consistent way of relating to the world in terms of Edith's and Frieda's sexuality. Following Newman, I read the letters with an awareness of my own subjective position in relation to conventions of the heteronormative narrative arc. I trust that reading with the arc in mind can compel us to question narrative and heteronormativity more deeply.

### Literature Review

There is general agreement among scholars that in historically specific terms, the “lesbian” did not exist before the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there is significant literature on female same-sex relationships in the nineteenth century in the United States and Britain, both of which influenced Canada greatly. This literature, while focusing on women who had “romantic friendships” with other women and women who “passed” as men, demonstrates that women’s same-sex sexual intimacy often co-existed with cross-sex sexual marriage. Some important contributors to this area of study include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Karen V. Hansen, Lillian Faderman, and Martha Vicinus.

Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual” and Hansen’s “No Kisses Like Yours,” for example, depict nineteenth century women as customarily close and intimate with each other and see this as an effect of their homosocial lives. Smith-Rosenberg’s analysis of the papers of 35 American families documents a female-centered world in which eighteenth and nineteenth century women routinely formed deeply felt same-sex friendships. Set within a particular historical and cultural setting, these sometimes erotic close friendships were not maintained in isolation; rather they were connected to social relations and shaped by the larger cultural setting, much of which was defined by separate spheres for men and women. The larger cultural setting helped generate a women’s world of love and ritual in which supportive women’s networks were built around the biological realities (pregnancies, childbirths, nursing, menopause) of womanhood. These intense female relationships were, as Smith-Rosenberg states, “a very behavioral and emotional option that was socially available to

nineteenth century women.”<sup>18</sup>

Women’s worlds of emotional richness were a cause and effect of social restrictions on intimacy between men and women. Here, family and social roles were strictly gendered, a situation that was also marked by emotional segregation. As Smith-Rosenberg notes, these heterosocial and homosocial worlds were complementary. Her analysis suggests that women’s attachments to one another, once formed, often remained unabated throughout their lives and co-existed with cross-sex marriage. By studying the social structure and the world view that informed women’s devotions, Smith-Rosenberg offers a historical perspective on women’s love and sexuality that is conscious of the twentieth century tendency to dichotomize sexuality, while keeping as its frame the nineteenth century “female world of love and ritual.”

Building on Smith-Rosenberg’s work, Hansen’s “No Kisses Is Like Youres” offers an analysis of love letters between two African American women before, during, and after the Civil War. Hansen provides an example of same-sex sexual intimacies that might have co-existed with heterosexual unions, but only conditionally. This contribution is notable in that it focuses on two free African American women, Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus. Hansen claims that the relationship between Brown and Primus differs from Smith-Rosenberg’s examples in that it was an explicitly erotic friendship. According to Hansen, the nine-year correspondence between a young domestic worker and a school teacher contains evidence of a “self-consciously sexual” relationship that included kissing and what Hansen names as “bosom sex.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Karen V. Hansen, “No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship between African-American Women During the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Gender and History* 7, no. 2 (1995), 158.



Addie and Rebecca's openly close attachment was largely sanctioned by neighbours, friends, and family, but when their relationship was believed by some kin to threaten possible future heterosexual relationships, the two women were cautioned to "not talk about it" by those closest to them. Addie and Rebecca's emotional ties, Hansen writes, were compatible with social obligations and heterosexual partnerships, but only if they "finessed the situation skillfully." For Addie, finessing the situation also had economic dimensions, as she was relatively poor and lacked family financial support. At one point, Addie wrote about marrying, "If I ever see a chance, I will take it, for I'm tired roving this unfriendly world."<sup>20</sup> Sure enough, Addie married in 1861, despite her love for Rebecca and despite Rebecca's protests.

Hansen notes that the fact that the correspondence ended at this time is significant, highlighting the incompatibility of this erotic friendship in this particular network of family, friends, and kin. In contrast, in Smith-Rosenberg's "Female World of Love and Ritual," (heterosexual) marriage was not incompatible with women's close friendships.<sup>21</sup> For my purposes, what is most significant is that Smith-Rosenberg and Hansen both agree that lesbian sexual identities did not exist through much of the nineteenth century and that women's intimate and erotic relationships were shaped by larger social and cultural factors and by class and race dynamics.

While Smith-Rosenberg and Hansen focus on women's same-sex intimate and erotic relationships in the nineteenth century, other scholars address what they call "passing women" in the same period. For example, an essay by the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project describes the arena of "passing women" as a significant

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>21</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," 1-29.

component of “emerging lesbian identities.” The essay, titled “She Even Chewed Tobacco: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America,” documents in a visual way how these nineteenth century “women” lived as men and claimed the love of women, masculine jobs, and male privilege as their right.<sup>22</sup>

Passing women and romantic friendships, historians generally agree, were part of the nineteenth century world. Historians disagree, however about what factors account for the shift from this world to the era of the modern lesbian and more generally the modern homosexual. For Michel Foucault, the key is sexological, scientific, and medical discourse. For Foucault, this is what best accounts for the profound transition from the world of the sodomite, who was a “temporary aberration,” to the world of the homosexual, who was a member of “a species.”<sup>23</sup> For John D’Emilio, in contrast, the major factors were urbanization and industrialization, which contributed to the rise of wage labour, increased possibilities for living apart from families, and the general sociability of separate sexual spheres.<sup>24</sup> George Chauncey, however, suggests that social and cultural developments within urban centers (rather than changing social structures) were key. The opportunity to live and work for wages in urban centers offered anonymity when needed and the greater numbers of men-loving-men made it possible to build new communities and cultures. For Chauncey, what is most important is that men developed new ways of inscribing and re-inscribing their sexual identity through language and self-representation, both of which developed from within their community-based experiences.

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<sup>22</sup> The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “She Even Chewed Tobacco: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1989), 183-194.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 43.

<sup>24</sup> John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 471.

He thus challenges Foucault's emphasis on elite discourse and rejects Foucault's notion that gay subjectivity developed as a "reverse discourse"; according to Chauncey's framework, medical discourse was a response to subcultural developments (not the other way around).<sup>25</sup> All three of these competing theories have potential applications to lesbian history, but it is significant that they are all based primarily on male examples and male models.

Smith-Rosenberg and Esther Newton were among the first to work on the historical emergence of modern lesbianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Building on her earlier work, Smith-Rosenberg traces women's same-sex intimate relationships into the twentieth century. She suggests that medical, feminist, and literary discourses that surrounded two generations of "New Women" profoundly shaped the creation of the modern lesbian.<sup>26</sup> Smith-Rosenberg argues that these discourses, which helped create the modern lesbian, were promulgated in response to the inroads made into the public sphere by the first generation of New Women in the late nineteenth century. This was a cohort of educated middle-to-upper-class white women who claimed their place in the public arena and incorporated the world of female love within single-sex institutions such as colleges, settlement houses, and hospitals for women and children. Smith-Rosenberg notes that these women were often single and many established close relationships with like-minded women. The successes of the first generation of New Women, however, were short-lived. Smith-Rosenberg suggests that a new wave of attacks were leveled by the new generation of male bourgeois professions

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<sup>25</sup> George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York: Basic, 1994), 27.

<sup>26</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Knopf, 1985).

and bureaucracies. Their arguments employed what Smith-Rosenberg calls "The New Scientific Discourse," in which this generation of male asylum directors, doctors, academics, psychiatrists, and psychologists shifted the definition of female deviance from the New Women's rejection of motherhood to their rejection of men.<sup>27</sup>

According to Smith-Rosenberg, while the first generation of New Women worked within the terms of Victorian discourse that employed a distinct language of femininity, the second generation of New Women in the 1920s adopted the sexual rhetoric of male physicians, sex reformers, politicians, and novelists.<sup>28</sup> Smith-Rosenberg argues that this new generation of women, seeking an equal footing with white males of their generation, severed their connections to their feminist women-centred foremothers and adopted more androgynous styles and sensibilities in order to achieve political and gender equality. Often placing themselves outside socially and sexually acceptable roles, this generation of New Women was deemed to be morally, politically, and psychologically threatening by male physicians, reformers, and educators.

Smith-Rosenberg attributes the efforts by sexologists to describe, classify, and demonize some of these women as a fundamental element in the creation of the discourse of the modern lesbian as an "invert." Sexologists believed that the more "mannish" a woman appeared, the more inverted was her sexuality. Some sexologists, as Smith-Rosenberg notes, nevertheless believed that because of the congenital nature of the "inversion," the female invert should be tolerated rather than vilified. Despite these sexologists' pleas for tolerance, others cautioned that women who were not "inverts"

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<sup>27</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 265.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

might be susceptible to their advances.<sup>29</sup> Lesbianism could spread.

Smith-Rosenberg, in sum, contends that the victories of the first generation of New Women made possible the androgynous and masculine world of the second generation. Moreover, she notes that the androgyny and masculinity used by the second generation of New Women sought to affirm their legitimacy, but marginalized them instead. For Smith-Rosenberg, modern lesbianism emerged in the context of the marginalization and demonization of New Women.<sup>30</sup>

Esther Newton suggests in “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Women” that the discourse of sexuality that surrounded the “mannish lesbian” symbolized the end of sexual fluidity for women. Newton, recalling similar arguments made by Smith-Rosenberg, suggests that novelist Radclyffe Hall, the author of the classic lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness, and other feminists embraced the image of the mannish lesbian and the accompanying discourse because they wanted their relationships publicly acknowledged and accepted as outside the sphere of “romantic” friendships. Newton claims that gender reversal and sexual desire, qualities understood to be masculine yet also claimed by progressive women, reinforced the discourse of the “mannish” lesbian. As evidence of the prevalence of this discourse, Newton cites the literature that defined sexual inversion as well as the works of “inverted” women who embraced these identifications.<sup>31</sup> Newton looks at this literature as an important defining feature of modern lesbian discourse. Newton sees the discourse as less of a critique of the New Woman. Rather for Newton, the discourse of the mannish lesbian was a way that

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<sup>29</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 271.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>31</sup> Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” Signs 9, no. 4 (1984), 557-575.

these women were able to claim sexual desire and love for women, both of which were generally understood as masculine in this era. In this way Newton sees the mannish lesbian as more of a subcultural innovation rather than Smith-Rosenberg's emphasis on sexological imposition; in other words, the mannish lesbian had some agency in the generation of her masculine attributes.

Building on Smith-Rosenberg's and Newton's work, Lisa Duggan looks to the late nineteenth century to describe the “terrifyingly difficult birth” of the modern lesbian. Documenting a “narrative-in formation,” Duggan’s essay “The Trials of Alice Mitchell” suggests that the modern lesbian emerged as a hybrid of two earlier nineteenth century forms of women’s partnerships, both of which were class-specific. The first was a working class practice and was characterized by what Duggan suggests was the “marriage” between a female husband who passed and worked as a man and her “wife.” The second was the middle class convention in which girls and women made passionate commitments to each other within a gender-segregated world. Duggan suggests that the modern lesbian identity was created from elements of these earlier same-sex partnerships, which were taken up by the sensationalist press, sexologists, and “lesbians.”<sup>32</sup> This helps Duggan explain why modern lesbian subjectivity has often included elements of same-sex desire and gender transgression.

At the core of Duggan's story is a case that the sensationalist press headlined as a “A Very Unnatural Crime.” Using court transcripts, witness testimonies, published letters, and newspaper accounts, Duggan recounts the 1892 murder of seventeen year old

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<sup>32</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *Signs* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1993), 793.

Freda Ward by nineteen year old Alice Mitchell in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>33</sup> Although there had previously been same-sex “love murders” in the press, Duggan explains that this crime was treated as unique and incomprehensible. According to the best available evidence, in February 1891, after exchanging rings, Freda agreed to Alice’s marriage proposal. Alice intended to dress in male clothing, cut her hair short, and identify herself as Alvin J. Ward, while Freda was to become Mrs. A. J. Ward. Once married, they planned to live elsewhere as man and wife. Duggan notes that both families were aware of the women’s intense affections for each other, but in July 1891, after reading the women’s correspondence, Freda’s older sister discovered the women’s plans to elope as man and wife. As a result, Freda’s family returned the engagement ring and other tokens of affection. Freda’s family forbade any future contact with Alice and Freda’s brother-in-law kept a close watch.

Devastated by the return of the engagement ring and the abrupt end to their relationship, Alice fell into despair, but she nevertheless maintained a correspondence with Freda. In the months preceding the murder, Alice found out about Ashley Roselle, a man who was courting Freda. When Alice confronted Freda with her knowledge of this, Freda responded with an apology and the promise to not see Ashley again. Alice, however, remained jealous, and the records indicate that she contemplated Freda’s murder from November 1891, at which time she stole her father’s straight razor and carried it with her. Freda who lived out of town, was scheduled to visit Memphis in November 1891. Alice, afraid that she would lose Freda to Ashley, made efforts to ascertain whether or not Ashley intended to see Freda again. In December and in January 1892, Alice wrote to Ashley and met with him to find out if he still had feelings for

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<sup>33</sup> Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell,” 791-814.

Freda.

In the final week of January, Freda arrived in Memphis, staying with friends of her family. Alice wrote passionate letters to Freda while Freda was in Memphis, but these went unread. Indeed one letter was returned to Alice with the word “returned” in Freda’s handwriting. Additionally, the evidence suggests that Alice looked for opportunities to see Freda, who was constantly under watch by Freda’s family members. The records also indicate that on 18 January Alice received a letter from Freda that declared her love for Alice, but that she was kept from Alice by her family and that she prayed for Alice’s forgiveness.

A week later, on the morning of 25 January 1892, Alice, a friend, and her friend’s six-year-old nephew took a buggy ride to the Memphis docks. Alice had stated to her friend that she was hoping to catch a glimpse of Freda before she left town. This was not the case, however. Alice managed to get close to Freda as she was stepping off her carriage to enter the docks and, without a word, Alice slit Freda’s throat with the straight razor.<sup>34</sup>

Duggan suggests that Mitchell’s story became as well-known as it did because she was a middle-class woman who employed working-class practices in sexualizing their relationship and playing with tropes of masculinity and femininity. Duggan uses the story of Alice and Freda to discuss “the emergence of a partially cross-gender identified lesbian” and the rise of a new narrative that signified separation from the family-based female world of the nineteenth century and the middle class values of “sexual purity and motherhood.” Duggan notes that Alice’s attempt to forge a new way of life, new in

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<sup>34</sup> Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 208. This account is from Appendix A, in which Duggan has provided a concise narrative of the homicide.



material and social terms, marked her as different and dangerous. Alice was deemed insane by the courts and was committed to the Tennessee Asylum in 1892. She died of a suspected suicide six years later.<sup>35</sup>

Duggan's analysis is important not only for what it tells us about Alice and Freda and what it reveals about class and gender, but also because of its contribution to the debate about the origins of modern lesbian identity. Rejecting an exclusive focus on sexological discourse or lesbian self-representation, Duggan argues for a more complex model in which women's same-sex relationships served as the basis of media and sexological accounts, which in turn influenced the ways in which women understood their relationships. According to Duggan, narratives of women's relationships were sensationalized in the press, adopted as case histories by sexologists, and then re-circulated and appropriated by women themselves as "identities" in what she calls "an extended battle" over the meaning of women's erotic partnerships at the turn of the century. The hybrid result, "the modern lesbian," was the socio/medical/cultural meaning that was slowly but increasingly applied to the experience of women-loving-women.<sup>36</sup> For Duggan, then, sexological discourse was one side of the "double edge" of the construction of modern lesbianism. The other side of the construction was subjective self-representation.<sup>37</sup>

Lillian Faderman, like Smith-Rosenberg and Duggan, places considerable weight on sexological discourse and its impact on the development of the discourse of the modern lesbian. Faderman, like Smith-Rosenberg, had contributed to the earlier debate about nineteenth century women's relationships in her book Surpassing the Love of Men:

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<sup>35</sup> Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell," 800.

<sup>36</sup> Duggan, "The Trial of Alice Mitchell," 795.

<sup>37</sup> Duggan, "The Trial of Alice Mitchell," 810.

Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present. In her broad survey, Faderman traces the demise of the romantic friendship and the development of lesbian subcultures well into twentieth century America. This theme is repeated and synthesized in her later survey, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers.

Building on the work of others, Faderman's contention is that sexologists changed the course of same-sex female relationships because their theories cast suspicion on women's romantic friendships. Sexological theories, while creating new categories of sexuality, also pathologized feelings and preferences that were previously acknowledged as part of "normal" female experience.<sup>38</sup> No longer could a woman dress in a masculine way, act in a masculine manner, or possess same-sex desires without her sexuality, and by extension her character, becoming suspect. Moreover, Faderman suggests that many women internalized sexological concepts, which laid the groundwork for lesbian subcultures.<sup>39</sup>

For my purposes, it is important to note that Faderman argues that many women did not internalize sexologists' ideas because they had not yet been exposed to sexological theories, at least until after World War I. She also suggests that without a vocabulary that accurately reflected their experiences, many early twentieth century women distinguished their love from what they read about in medical books. Faderman posits that the adoption of alternative self-definitions that rejected or ignored the pathologizing discourse of modern lesbianism may have permitted "devoted romantic companions" to live their lives as publicly as they did. As evidence, Faderman includes

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<sup>38</sup> Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: Morrow, 1981), 314.

<sup>39</sup> Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America (New York: Oxford, 1991), 6.

examples of famous couples whose long-term relationships spanned the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. These included Jane Addams (Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of the Hull House Settlement) and her “devoted companion” Mary Rozet Smith and M. Carey Thomas (president of Bryn Mawr College) and her companion Mary Garrett. Faderman notes that if these women had to call themselves anything, they were most likely to refer to themselves as romantic friends or devoted companions, unusual only in that they were anachronisms left over from the supposedly purer Victorian era.<sup>40</sup>

How is it, then, that Faderman includes these early twentieth century relationships in her survey of lesbian life in twentieth century America if these women did not use the word “lesbian” to describe themselves or their relationships? Faderman and Martha Vicinus have both grappled with the historiographical dilemma regarding the historical appellation of “lesbian.” In order to include early twentieth century relationships in her survey of lesbianism, Faderman employs a definition that is much broader than the narrow meaning provided by early twentieth century sexological discourse. She suggests an evolving lesbianism that is in constant flux, then as now. From a contemporary standpoint, Faderman notes that the designation of “lesbian” is largely self-defining and is not necessarily dependent upon a sexual relationship with another woman. Influenced by the history of lesbian feminism in the 1970s (and the phenomenon of “political lesbians”), she suggests that contemporary women with little sexual interest in other women may see themselves as lesbian as long as their energies are given to women’s concerns and they are critical of the institution of heterosexuality.<sup>41</sup> Recalling this

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 5.

contemporary meaning, Faderman's definition of a lesbian relationship is one in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may or may not be part of the relationship.<sup>42</sup>

In her examination of women's intimate relationships from the early twentieth century, when most "romantic friends" left behind little concrete evidence of their sexualities, Faderman looks for clues left by women who maintained partnerships with other women, who she refers to as "homoaffectional."<sup>43</sup> These clues include, among other things, exchanging daily letters, sharing a bed, adopting children, reserving one bed to share in hotels, owning a home jointly, and bequeathing a family fortune. In this way, Faderman provides evidence of women's intimate relationships that were homoaffectional and, under her definition, also "lesbian."

Faderman's definition of lesbian is useful for this project, but I do not read Edith and Frieda as anachronisms from an earlier time. I suggest that the two women created a self-identified devoted partnership that was neither an "anachronism" nor an extension of early "innocent" times, but a considered formulation of sexual identity that emerged in dialogue with the cultural discourse of the modern lesbian in the 1920s.

Martha Vicinus, in her monograph Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1887-1928, argues against looking for a magical moment when the modern lesbian emerged in the context of sexological discourse or media representations. Vicinus looks instead for representations of experience, such as transcripts, letters, and diaries. She contends that historians should work with the complexities and contradictions that mark all efforts to define and classify same-sex desire while also acknowledging their

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<sup>42</sup> Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, 16, 23.

multiplicity. She departs from definitions of lesbianism that look to single unilateral events, maintaining that all categories remain provisional. Thus Vicinus argues against linear history, transformative moments, and even “the necessity of a shared community of lesbians for the history of the lesbian.”<sup>44</sup>

Vicinus’s provisional definition of lesbian sexual identity, one that resists locating these women within a particular historical narrative of development, is useful to this study. Frieda and Edith opted for a description of their sexual identity that worked for them, naming themselves a “devoted” couple, which they positioned in relation to the discourse of the “modern lesbian.”

Many historians of sexuality, however, view the 1928 obscenity trials of Radclyffe Hall’s British novel The Well of Loneliness as a watershed for the expansion and dissemination of the discourse of the modern lesbian, in and beyond Great Britain. Diana Souhami, for example, in her monograph The Trials of Radclyffe Hall, sees media and sexology as critical in the dissemination of lesbian identity via these very public obscenity trials.<sup>45</sup> Indeed Laura Doan, in Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture, refers to the years prior to 1928 as “moments of indeterminacy.” Doan suggests that the publicity of the trial disseminated knowledge of what became known as lesbian attire and that the promulgation of the “lesbian image” was pivotal in the establishment of a modern lesbian identity.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Doan suggests that the English print media publicized an upper class standard of lesbian sexual freedom that was inaccessible to most women of the middle and working class.

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<sup>44</sup>Martha Vicinus, Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1887-1928 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xxiii.

<sup>45</sup>Diana Souhami, The Trials of Radclyffe Hall (London: Virago, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Laura Doan, Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 96.

Terry Castle in The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture describes the upper class standard of the modern lesbian as the “grim and uncouth figure in lumpy tweeds or ill-fitting motorcycle jacket.”<sup>47</sup> In pre-Radclyffe Hall lesbian publications, however, Castle offers varied cultural portrayals of lesbians that resonate with Edith’s and Frieda’s encounters with the “modern lesbian.”<sup>48</sup>

Steven Maynard, in “Hell Witches in Toronto: Notes on Lesbian Visibility in Early Twentieth Century Canada,” notes the British lesbian obscenity trials' powerful impact on the discourse of the modern lesbian in Toronto, Canada. Maynard examines public perceptions of lesbians in the late 1920s in the sensational Hush, a Toronto tabloid.<sup>49</sup> Calling attention to tabloids as “one significant site of lesbian visibility,” Maynard’s brief essay documents a short series of articles published by Hush in October 1928 and January 1929. Maynard suggests that these articles about lesbians were generated as a result of the publicity surrounding the obscenity trials in London. Maynard notes, “England has just awakened to these Horrors, why not Toronto?”<sup>50</sup>

With the aid of this series of tabloid articles, Maynard demonstrates that Toronto's print media disseminated a hyperbolized and vilifying image of the modern lesbian. At the same time, however, Maynard notes that some women used the press as a site of self-fashioning; moreover, Maynard notes that these articles advertised Hall’s book and helped generate an emerging lesbian culture.

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<sup>47</sup> Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Terry Castle ed., The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology from Ariosto to Stonewall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Castle, as a literary critic, approaches the subject of lesbianism as an *idea* that took shape over centuries, rather than as a modern subjectivity.

<sup>49</sup> Steven Maynard, “Hell Witches in Toronto: Notes on Lesbian Visibility in Early Twentieth Century Canada,” Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate 9, no. 2 (2004): 191-206.

<sup>50</sup> Maynard, 200.

Maynard indicates that Hush “gave a name to the nameless vice between women” and was “not bound by linguistic decorum.” Hush frequently used the word “lesbianism” rather than the “highbrow” terminology of “sex-invert.” Hush’s image of a lesbian was a man-woman, sporting closely-cropped hair, in a masculine mode of attire. This lesbian was prone to coarse speech and had a swagger when she walked. The articles, Maynard notes, provided a location of lesbian visibility within a geographical place and a class structure. Maynard notes that one of the Hush articles, “Hell Witches in Toronto,” cited the lesbian as a symptom of upper class decadence. These “shameless females beyond the law” were reputed to hold sado-masochistic orgies in Rosedale, a wealthy Toronto neighbourhood. Maynard points out, however, that these lesbian orgy narratives were drawn directly from tabloids in the London press, so should not be taken at face value.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, Maynard suggests that certain passages of these tabloids displayed a “grounded historical understanding of lesbianism.” Some of the articles, for example, noted that non-elite women felt that by cross-dressing, they were safer in public, they could get a better job, and they could earn more money. Maynard additionally notes that another article commented upon lesbians’ “curious freemasonry” in their recognition of each other, while another article related modern forces as culpable in the “development of masculine propensities among modern women.”<sup>52</sup> In this way Maynard demonstrates the value of popular tabloids as a source of lesbian visibility in this era. These tabloids used the word “lesbian” frequently, provided a definition as “a certain class of perverted women who fall in love with other women,” and offered an image of how these women looked and dressed. While we do not know whether Freda and Edith encountered the

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<sup>51</sup> Maynard, 197.

<sup>52</sup> Maynard, 196, 200.

tabloid representations discussed by Maynard, these representations and others like them were part of the social and cultural milieu in which Freda and Edith lived.

Apart from Maynard's work, very little has been written about Canadian lesbian history in the 1920s, and “what little we do know,” Maynard notes, has emerged through the private letters, diaries, and memoirs of white middle class women.<sup>53</sup> But there has been important work done on U.S. lesbian history in this era. In Gay New York, Chauncey portrays a bohemian white lesbian culture that thrived in Greenwich Village and Harlem alongside a very robust black and white gay culture. Chauncey's focus is on gay men, but his book depicts lesbians in a variety of New York spaces, including women's literary clubs, as well as gay speakeasies, rent parties and drag balls.<sup>54</sup> Eric Garber, in “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture in Jazz Age Harlem,” and Leila Rupp, in A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America, portray a mixed white and black lesbian and gay culture in Harlem that emerged in the context of Prohibition, the Jazz Age, and the Roaring Twenties. Garber notes that the social and sexual attitudes of the Harlem subculture were best reflected in the music of the blues, some of which referenced and affirmed same-sex intimacy and love, and that these attitudes spread beyond Harlem through music, literature, and the arts.<sup>55</sup>

Hazel V. Carby, in “It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues,” also focuses on sexuality and the blues during the Harlem Renaissance. In her broader discussion of Black female sexual autonomy and race records, Carby

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<sup>53</sup> Maynard, 191.

<sup>54</sup> George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940 (New York: Basic, 2000), 228.

<sup>55</sup> George Chauncey, 255; Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem, in Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr., 320; Leila J. Rupp, A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 107.



discusses Ma Rainey's composition "Prove It On Me Blues." Carby notes that Rainey affirmed her lesbianism in her lyrics' declaration that her friends "must've been women, cause I don't like no men." At the same time Carby notes that Rainey's lyrics expressed contempt for a society that rejected lesbianism.<sup>56</sup> In this example, the lesbian does not like men, one element of the template of the 1920s "modern lesbian." Despite Carby's acknowledgement of Rainey's difficulties, she nevertheless maintains that black lesbian blues singers lived and loved in a pre-Depression era that witnessed powerful black female sexual agency and desire. According to Garber and Carby, the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and the end of Prohibition in 1933 brought the Harlem Renaissance to an "abrupt halt," severely curtailing the vibrant black gay and lesbian culture that had existed in the 1920s.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, these depictions of lesbian culture in the interwar years document a particular "template" of modern lesbian identity that was very much shaped by gender, race, class, and culture.

Other women of the early twentieth century might not fall so easily into the template of modern lesbian identity. Indeed, other forms of lesbianism have been overshadowed by the plentiful scholarship on more "public" lesbian-looking and -acting women. A wider historiography can include biographies of more "private" women-loving-women, who fall outside early twentieth century depictions of the modern lesbian. Some of these biographies acknowledge other forms of lesbian sexual identity with the use of identifiers that suggest non-heteronormative subjectivities. Some address famous women in social work, education, politics, and the arts, including Americans Jane Addams, M. Carey Thomas, and Eleanor Roosevelt and Canadians Frances Loring and

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<sup>56</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986), 19.

<sup>57</sup> Garber, 318-331.

Florence Wyle. The best of these biographies acknowledge these women's intimate same-sex relationships and highlights the significance of the relationships in these women's lives. For example, Elspeth Cameron's biography of the sculptors Loring and Wyle, also known as "The Girls," highlights the two women's intense emotional and physical connections; they lived together for sixty-years and "their own accounts of meeting are in the tradition of 'love at first sight.'" Cameron asks, "Were they a couple? Were they lesbian?" Without directly answering this question, Cameron cites the numerous aspects of these women's relationship that place the women's relationship as existing outside heteronormativity. Cameron's narrative weaves together the women's long-term intimate relationship with their careers as two of Canada's foremost sculptors.<sup>58</sup> One of the best biographies, however, is Blanche Wiesen Cook's biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. Cook frames First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's relationship with Lorena Hickok as a romantic and passionate friendship. She cites examples of their exhaustive letter-writing that attest to the intensity of the women's physical and emotional passions for each other. Moreover, Cook addresses the fact that their relationship was "not a schoolgirl crush, that they were not in a nineteenth century storybook, and they did not swoon unrequitedly upon a nineteenth century campus." Cook writes, "They knew the score."<sup>59</sup>

These, of course, are famous women. For non-famous women, the historical record of lesbian relationships is more elusive. Often there are no papers or correspondences, memoirs, and diaries were either never written or preserved. Indeed women of the middle and lower classes had less time and education. If non-famous

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<sup>58</sup> Elspeth Cameron, *And Beauty Answers: The Life of Frances Loring and Florence Wyle* (Toronto: Cormorant, 2007), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt Vol. 1: 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 479.

women and/or less affluent women did engage in life-writing, the chances of the preservation of their written records was slight, due to the fact that they were not public figures and their surviving loved ones likely had few resources in the area of proper preservation. Thus oral histories are especially useful for non-famous women.

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis's groundbreaking Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community uses oral histories to chronicle the lives of working-class lesbians in Buffalo, New York, from the 1930s to the 1960s. Influenced by this work, Elise Chenier, in "Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture: Living 'The Gay Life' in Toronto, 1955-1965," employs oral history and the popular press in her analysis of the Toronto lesbian bar community. Chenier identifies a lesbian culture that was sharply divided by class and gender and affected by race.<sup>60</sup> Becki Ross, looking at Toronto lesbians in the 1970s, relies on the underground press and oral history in her examination of Toronto's lesbian-feminist community, The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, Line Chamberland charts the voices of Montreal lesbians in her examination of lesbian bars as lesbian spaces in "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-1975."<sup>62</sup>

From a more national perspective, Valerie Korinek looks at how Canadian women encountered and interpreted images of lesbians during the 1950s and 1960s in her monograph Roughing it the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties. Korinek demonstrates that stories and illustrations about friendships between

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<sup>60</sup> Elise Chenier, "Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture: Living 'The Gay Life' in Toronto, 1955-1965," Left History 9, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 85-112.

<sup>61</sup> Becki Ross, The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-1975" Journal of Homosexuality 25 no. 3 (1993): 231-269.

women could be read “perversely” by a Canadian lesbian audience. She suggests that lesbians, or women who thought they might be lesbian, could learn about themselves through magazine pictures and articles.<sup>63</sup> Lynn Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman expand on Canadian lesbians’ “perverse reading” of media representations in the film Forbidden Love, their documentary of post-World War II lesbian imagery in pulp fiction.<sup>64</sup>

Much of the work of Kennedy and Davis, Chenier, Ross, Chamberland, Korinek, and Fernie and Weissman focuses on the post-World War Two era, so is not directly relevant for a discussion of two Toronto lesbians in the 1920s and 1930s. The one partial exception, the book by Kennedy and Davis, focuses on working-class butch-fem lesbian bar culture, which was not Frieda and Edith's milieu. Two other scholarly works are more directly relevant, one because it focuses on Canadian lesbian history in the early twentieth century and the other because of its arguments about lesbian subjectivity in a class-privileged early-twentieth-century U.S. woman.

Cameron Duder’s book Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada 1900-1965 is an effort to bring the lives of Canadian lesbians who have been “thus far been neglected in historical studies” into the historical narrative.<sup>65</sup> In his survey, Duder wants to “reveal how Canadian lesbians understood their desires between 1900-1965.”<sup>66</sup> Duder offers a national perspective on what he sees as a transition from the romantic friendship to the modern lesbian. Using correspondence and oral histories from lesbians and bisexual women across Canada, Duder suggests that women in same-sex intimate

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<sup>63</sup> Valerie Korinek, Roughing it in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> Aerlyn Weissman, Forbidden Love: Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives (Montreal: NFB, 1992).

<sup>65</sup> Cameron Duder, “Awfully Devoted Women”: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>66</sup> Duder, 12.

relationships in the interwar period were more explicitly sexual, were influenced by the language of sexology, and were aware of social disapproval and familial rejection. In fact, he uses the Fraser/Williams correspondence in his survey of Canadian lesbian and bisexual women. Duder's book provides a first glimpse into Canadian versions of upper-middle class lesbian life.

Duder acknowledges that non-heteronormative relationships must be included in a history of same-sex relationships. Duder's criteria for inclusion in his broad study required that his subjects' primary emotional and domestic relationships were with women, that these relationships could be lifelong partnerships, and that their devotion went beyond the usual structures of female friendship, even as Duder acknowledges that the women he discusses never described themselves as lesbians, homosexuals, or inverts. Duder notes that "these relationships were hidden from many but were there to be seen by those who knew when and how to see and hear."<sup>67</sup>

His book is divided into two parts; the first looks at women's same sex intimate relationships before World War II and the second examines women's relationships after the war and up to the year 1965. The first section, entitled "Awfully Devoted Odd Women" is directly related to this dissertation. Duder uses five different sources of lesbian letters, including the Fraser/Williams collection, to examine the transition from romantic friendship to modern discourses of sexuality. The Fraser/Williams correspondence and the other letters from this era are examples of upper middle class Canadian women whose relationships conformed in some ways to what Duder claims were "the norms of the romantic friendship."

Duder views Canadian lesbian subjectivity in the early twentieth century in two

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.,15,19.

ways. First he looks at how women found each other and continued their relationship “in a period when there did not exist large and visible lesbian communities and political campaigning.” How these women found each other and how they continued their relationships, Duder acknowledges, was “done in ways that were not so outside heteronormative behaviour and thus did not ostracize these women completely.” Duder suggests that women who loved other women made connections with each other through the romantic language of devotion and Duder indicates the women often referred to themselves and other couples as “devoted.” For some women, devotional language was accompanied by the wearing of “masculine attire.” As evidence of sporting a masculine image, Duder employs pictures of Frieda’s closely cropped hair and notes that on occasion Frieda referred to herself as a “guy” in closing her letters.<sup>68</sup>

Evidence of physical sexuality is the second theme of Duder’s survey of pre-1950 Canadian lesbians. Duder posits that lesbian identity often needs to be proven with examples of intimate physical activity with other woman. Duder notes that in some of the written sources, there is enough evidence to suggest a physical relationship even if genital sexuality cannot be proven. Women’s intimate physical connections are acknowledged by Duder to have been influenced by the language of sexology. As proof, Duder offers the common use of the word “unnatural” and “libidinal” in women’s references to their relationships.<sup>69</sup>

Duder argues that women’s passionate friendships were far more sexual but that the absence of testimony is the result more of linguistic constraints than of an actual absence of genital contact. Duder uses as evidence accounts of intimate physical contact

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 67-69.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 16, 90.

in the Fraser/Williams correspondence. He notes the fact of Edith and Frieda sleeping together, that Edith mistakenly kissed her friend thinking it was Frieda, and that Frieda indicated that she hoped to save her muscle-toned body for Edith. Duder asks, “How are we to interpret the actual content of relationships in this period of change in letters written only a few years after the ‘innocence’ of the romantic friendship had been eroded?” Duder answers that we “must be prepared to accept that, suddenly, when the discourse became more widespread in the 1920s, their behaviour and possibly even their entire self-concept changed in response to the discourse. Nevertheless, despite the presence of medical discourse, he notes that “there was a long period of slippage between the discourse of female sexual passivity [romantic friendship] and that of sexology and that neither discourse was hegemonic.”<sup>70</sup> Duder concludes that it was the language that was used to describe the relationship that had changed, rather than the content of the relationships. Ultimately Duder suggests that lesbian subjectivity in the early twentieth century was based on a sense of difference from other women because of same-sex desire, resistance to social attitudes, and a passionate commitment to a long-term relationship.

The remaining two-thirds of Duder’s survey is devoted to lesbian lives after the Second World War to 1965. Here Duder uses interview material from 32 interviews to “build a picture” of how women understood and explored their desires when most of the women of his study had not heard of lesbianism and thought that they were unique. Duder suggests that even though Canadian women of this period had access to sexual information, they actually knew very little about sexuality. Duder also notes that Canadian lesbians of the mid-twentieth century risked breaks with their natal families as

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 83-88.

a result of increased social intolerance towards women's same-sex intimate relationships. Duder ends this second part of his book by stating that Canadian lesbians are visible if we look in the right places.

My dissertation builds upon Duder's groundwork by situating the Fraser/Williams relationship within a non-heteronormative space. In "Writing Desire," I offer an analysis of the self-reflections that are so prevalent in the Fraser/Williams correspondence. My sole focus on the Fraser/Williams correspondence has allowed me to explore more deeply the ways in which two women came to realize their "devoted" relationship to each other in the context of their culture and in relation to their families and professions. Rather than "looking for the lesbians in Canadian history" this dissertation documents how two lesbians, through their correspondence, found themselves. As a result, this study reveals the processes by which life choices and behaviours were predicated upon desire and the ways in which these choices influenced self-identity at particular moments in a Canadian context.

My dissertation, while building upon Duder's work, also differs from it. Duder's work is a broad survey of Canadian lesbians over the better part of the twentieth century, while my project is interested in one correspondence that took place primarily in the 1920s and 1930s. Duder uses the Fraser/Williams correspondence as only one of the thirty-two sources in his study, thus limiting his in-depth exploration of this extensive correspondence, while I employ solely the correspondence in creating a biography of a relationship.

My project also differs from Duder's work in that Duder's survey employs segments of the Fraser/Williams correspondence as partial evidence for a greater



hypothesis regarding Canadian lesbian subjectivity. Duder looks to the pages of the correspondence as proof, for example, that lesbians of the early part of the century were close to their natal families and that lesbians who expressed their passion in terms of romantic friendships did indeed have physical relationships. My project differs from Duder's as I do not suggest general characteristics about lesbians in Canada that are derived from this correspondence; rather this study is specific to the development of desire between two particular women within the frame of their extensive letter-writing.

My dissertation suggests an unfolding narrative of desire between two women as developed in their correspondence. Because of its microscopic focus, my project allows for an exploration of the many nuances in the development of sexuality that reverberate throughout the correspondence. I include analyses of words, sketches, and meanings that these particular women applied to their sense of their sexual selves in the context of the modern world in which they lived. This included who they felt they were becoming in relation to each other and to their friends, family and acquaintances and who they described themselves to be in the face of modernism and modern lesbian discourse. These meanings were evidenced in their experiences of this discourse in books, theatre, and scientific lectures.

This project also differs from Duder's in that it takes into account the importance of the act of writing the correspondence, not just as a source of evidence but as a significant aspect of the shaping of these women's desires. I suggest that the correspondence provided a space in which these women realized their identities as "devoted," a self-description that engaged with the modern culture in which they lived.

Most importantly this dissertation differs from Duder in framing the

correspondence as a location wherein Frieda and Edith acted as agents of their desire. In their correspondence they developed the meaning of “devoted women” in their lives. Moreover, they strategized about how the revelation of the choice of their life partner could affect their personal and professional lives. Some people they told and from others they withheld. In this way, Edith and Frieda affirmed their identity as “devoted women” by deciding together with whom they could share this most central part of their lives. Thus it was through the correspondence that these women produced, enhanced, nurtured and protected their same-sex sexual desire. I suggest that the two women constructed specific meanings for their desires that were unique to their position in the world in which they lived.

The other work that is most directly relevant for this dissertation is Elizabeth Kennedy’s essay “‘But We Could Never Talk About It’: The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928-1933.”<sup>71</sup> Kennedy asks *how* did private middle-class women conceptualize themselves and how did that shape the way they moved through their daily lives? Kennedy is interested in the discretionary ways that women used particular ideas about lesbianism to construct themselves and understand how they were connected in the world. Kennedy’s work is based on an oral history that recounts events and emotions sixty years after they occurred, but it is closely connected to this project in that Kennedy also studies subjective experiences of middle-class lesbian desire, discretion and identity in the 1920s and 1930s.

Kennedy’s essay, which focuses on Julia Boyer Reinstein, speaks to what Kennedy defines as a distinctive and class-specific lesbian way of managing discretion in

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<sup>71</sup>Elizabeth Lapovsky-Kennedy, “‘But We Would Never Talk about It’: The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South-Dakota, 1928-1933,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 15-40.

relation to family and profession while still pursuing a rich lesbian social life. Reinstein was a young upper-middle-class woman in the 1920s and 1930s and an active lesbian in a community of lesbian friends. She was “out” to her immediate family members, who were supportive of her, and she had few, if any, negative feelings about being a lesbian, but she was discreet, rarely mentioning lesbianism to her family and friends.<sup>72</sup>

The subject of lesbian discretion and desire is addressed directly by Kennedy, who refers to the paucity of scholarship on lesbians who led private lives in the early twentieth century. Kennedy points out that analyses of women’s same-sex intimate relationships that were discreet have been unavailable for a number of reasons. The first is that the sources for these types of relationships *are* very private and therefore rare. Second, these sources were often written in the same discretionary manner. Most women left little or no trace of how they considered themselves in relation to lesbianism.<sup>73</sup> Because Edith and Frieda lived largely discreet lives, but left an extensive correspondence wherein they discussed their discretion, this project is able to address discretion and disclosure in relation to middle-class women’s same-sex desires and identities. This dissertation, in effect, answers some of the questions posed by Kennedy regarding identity, desire, and discretion. I suggest, in response to Kennedy’s analysis, that Edith and Frieda were neither “in the closet” nor “out”; they were devoted women. Edith and Frieda’s discretionary self-disclosure was a way of maintaining their desire and their devotion in the context of their familial, social, and professional worlds.

In this literature review, much of the relevant literature has been concerned with the transition from the romantic friendships and passing women of the nineteenth century

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<sup>72</sup> Kennedy, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Kennedy, 17.

to the lesbian communities and lesbian movements of the mid-twentieth century. Like much of the work reviewed here, my work is situated in the interwar period and the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. My contributions to the history of sexuality and the history of lesbianism are informed by the work of all of these authors. My study contributes to the scholarship in that it addresses middle-class, professional white women in Canada and it focuses on one particular relationship that produced and was produced by a lengthy correspondence. What this study brings to the conversation is an in-depth analysis of this valuable and extensive source material. My study permits scholars to broaden their understanding of the history of lesbianism in the twentieth century by offering an analysis of how middle-class professional white women who loved other women perceived themselves in relation to contemporary discourses of the “modern lesbian.” By asking how these women related to the discourses of modern lesbian identity, this study allows us to consider important questions regarding the transition from same-sex female intimacy in the nineteenth century to lesbian identities and communities in the twentieth century.

### **Life-Writing**

Frieda and Edith defined themselves and their relationship in their writing. Understanding the method by which they wrote their lives is an important part of considering how Frieda and Edith came to understand their desire and their relationship to each other. This is what Marlene Kadar sees in life-writing, which she describes as a method of self-revelation or the emancipation of the self.<sup>74</sup> According to Kadar, neither the reader nor the author is absent from the text. In Frieda’s and Edith’s letters, each

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<sup>74</sup> Marlene Kadar ed., *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992), 11.

woman discovered herself in the presence of the other. Frieda and Edith continually affected each other in their reading and writing of their letters.

Sally Newman's study of the letters of Vernon Lee resuscitates lesbian desire within historical practice. Newman places the letters between writer Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1865-1935) and Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson and a smaller correspondence with Mary Robinson DuCloux in the centre of the debate over what might constitute lesbian desire.<sup>75</sup> In this study, Newman acknowledges that letters that made specific references to same sex devotion had been excised from the Vernon Lee archive. In an attempt to recover the loss, Newman employs a non-heteronormative approach to reading the correspondence. She accomplishes this by widening her definition of what constitutes the discourse of "lovers." Newman points out, for example, that the sheer number of letters between Lee and Thompson evidenced a passionate relationship, despite the letters' quotidian content. For Newman, the circumstances surrounding the correspondence also signaled the emotional intensity of the women's exchange. As an example of this, she suggests that Lee's nervous breakdown and the abrupt ending of their correspondence were not unrelated to Robinson's marriage. Reading beyond the text of the letters enabled Newman to unearth a more passionate relationship than what had been previously acknowledged.

My analysis brings to the scholarship on life-writing a case study of a correspondence that was written with an immediacy from both sides and one that was self-reflective and engaged with many larger cultural debates about women. These debates revolved around women in professions, women and love, and women's

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<sup>75</sup> Sally Newman, "The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, nos.1-2 (2005): 51-75.

engagement with modern culture and technology.

### **Modernism**

The technologies and culture that flourished in the 1920s played an important role within the correspondence. In the context of this dissertation, dramatic social changes that signaled 1920s modernism corresponded to the upheaval in what literary scholar Ann Douglas in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* sees as “feminine” Victorian values, particularly those values connected with moralization. The struggles endured by the modern single woman are considered in Douglas’s arguments regarding the cultural matricide of the Victorian monarch. These values, Douglas suggests, were embodied in the matriarchal figures of the age such as Frances E. Willard and Carrie Chapman Catt. In later years, Douglas points out, the Victorian monarch was “scapegoated by her descendants; the ills of an entire society were laid at the door of the sex whose prestige is always held expendable.” Douglas nevertheless contends that the moderns “could not altogether sever the umbilical cord, as the very weapons they used against the matriarch were borrowed from her arsenal.” Douglas notes that modernism’s finest cultural achievements had roots in the older matriarchal culture they opposed. One example offered by Douglas was strategies of self-empowerment that had also been the tools of the white middle-class women’s movement.<sup>76</sup> Frieda’s and Edith’s efforts to maintain ties with their mothers, develop a same-sex intimate relationship, and engage with modern culture as culturally “savvy” women support Douglas’s contentions.

The culturally “savvy” woman of modernity is described by Angela Woollacott in

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<sup>76</sup> Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday Press, 1995), 7-8.

her book To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity. Woollacott sees this woman as border crossing, traveling alone, breaking social conventions, and becoming part of the public social landscape. Modernity for Woollacott, however, is primarily defined by the belief in the possibility of personal transformation. Personal transformation, imbued with experiments with new living arrangements, new career and educational possibilities, and new forms of sexual expression were key aspects of modernity, described by Woollacott as existing alongside the emergence of global connectedness.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, Woollacott argues, the modern woman took full advantage of rapid technological advancements in communication and travel in the form of steam-powered ocean liners, the telegraph, and photography. Woollacott's description of the "modern woman," while set in a very different geographic context, provides a useful framework for considering the lives of Frieda and Edith.

Jean Barman's biography, Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier, reveals the larger cultural tensions between the persona of modern independent woman and the iconic Victorian monarch. Skinner was in a position where she had to choose between her relationship with her mother and her success as a journalist. Thus modernity, for Barman, is signaled by the difficult choices that women had to make between success in their modern profession and success in their personal lives.<sup>78</sup> Frieda and Edith faced these choices and responded in ways that help us understand the problems and possibilities of modern women in this period.

### **Medicine**

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<sup>77</sup> Angela Woollacott, To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>78</sup> Jean Barman, Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

Frieda and Edith also help us revisit and reevaluate the history of professional women in this period. Regina Morantz-Sanchez provides a useful background in looking at the challenges faced by female physicians. Morantz-Sanchez notes that female medical students of the 1920s did not share the same camaraderie that was experienced in previous decades. Female physicians in the 1920s, having graduated from mostly coeducational medical colleges, viewed their successes and failures in terms of their personal merit. Thus female physician's personal challenges were seen as individual, private and irrelevant to the larger female community.<sup>79</sup>

Many of the arguments regarding women and medicine within the scholarship on the history of medicine are affirmed in the Fraser/Williams correspondence. As supported by the secondary literature in Canada, there were few women doctors and even fewer medical researchers in this period. In the Canadian context, Veronica Strong-Boag notes that female physicians in Canada were as rare as in the United States and that professionalization of the medical profession had a deleterious effect on the numbers of women entering medical schools.<sup>80</sup> Strong-Boag notes that in Canada women doctors were not readily recognized as professional physicians until the 1950s.<sup>81</sup> Frieda's and Edith's experiences help us understand not only the difficulties of acceptance into medical programs but also women's responses to gender discrimination.

Gender not only played a role in female admittance into medical colleges and institutions, gender also had an impact into how female physicians were perceived.

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<sup>79</sup> Regina Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000), 304.

<sup>80</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, "Canada's Women Doctors: Feminism Constrained" in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880's-1920's*, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 209.

<sup>81</sup> Veronica Strong Boag, "Canada's Women Doctors: Feminism Constrained," 129.



Gender additionally played a role into female physicians' self-perceptions. Morantz-Sanchez offers a perspective that is sensitive to how women are socialized or expected to be in terms of gender. She sees a greater presence of American female doctors who interacted with their patients in ways that were less invasive than their male colleagues. Morantz-Sanchez suggests that female physicians were more likely to be proponents of preventative medicine, to be involved in fields of social hygiene, and to be advocates of milder drugs. Frieda's experiences with her patients and her choice to enter into preventative medicine help us understand some of the ways in which gender played a role in Frieda's interactions with her patients, and in her choice to enter the field of preventative medicine and hygiene.

Canadian sociologist Mariana Valverde supports the findings of Morantz-Sanchez. Valverde discusses the ideology of domesticity as part of the discourse surrounding women's entry into the public sphere.<sup>82</sup> The two authors acknowledge that women on both sides of the border were strongly identified with public health and because female doctors were indeed women, they were expected to be empathic attendants. This analysis regarding female physicians and expectations regarding a "motherly" practice is reflected in Frieda's reflections on her medical education.

Frieda's correspondence suggests that she was not always an empathic attendant. As her letters attest, she was fascinated by bacteriology, not people. Frieda's internship in obstetrics at New York's Hospital for Women and Children and her later employment as a lecturer in preventative medicine and social hygiene clearly illustrate the decidedly gendered expectations of the medical community at large rather than Frieda's personal

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<sup>82</sup> Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), 10-11.

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A historical overview of Canadian patient care in obstetrics is provided in Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950 by Wendy Mitchinson. Mitchinson's work is important to this project because it offers insight into patients' perceptions of female physicians. Mitchinson states that obstetrical patients wanted access to women physicians. She attributes the establishment of Women's College Hospital as a mark of patient perception that gender made a difference when it came to patient care. The female physician, it was hoped, would treat female patients in a motherly way.<sup>83</sup> Recalling Morantz-Sanchez, Mitchinson notes that the quality of health care was higher in general when obstetric patients were cared for by females. Morantz-Sanchez and Strong-Boag also suggest that immigrants (most often in obstetrical cases) were more likely to prefer a female physician. This is noted in Frieda's correspondence regarding her experiences with patients in the obstetrical ward.<sup>84</sup>

Though Mitchinson is constrained because of her limited access to patient records, her monograph nevertheless reveals the depth of inequity in the doctor- patient relationship in the field of obstetrics. Mitchinson notes that inequities of sex privilege were compounded by physician authority and physician gender.<sup>85</sup> Here a focus upon the care clients received from female physicians might shed more light on this issue. Frieda's letters regarding her frank exchanges with her patients provide a welcome addition to Mitchinson's work.

Mariana Valverde in The Age of Light, Soap and Water; Moral Reform in English

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<sup>83</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, Giving Birth in Canada 1900-1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>84</sup> Morantz-Sanchez, 151.

<sup>85</sup> Mitchinson, 41.

Canada 1885-1925 highlights a dialogue of power between middle and working class people; patient and doctor; and reformer and reformed. One of the locations of tension, she suggests, is found in the patient-doctor exchange.<sup>86</sup> Valverde's discussion of class differences and negotiations between patient and doctor are also reflected in Mitchinson's monograph and affirmed by Frieda's first-hand accounts of her patients' negotiations. On occasion, for example, Frieda's letters indicate that her patients were demanding and negotiated their pain control. In this way, the literature regarding female physicians and their relationship to their patients is augmented by Frieda's accounts of herself and her patients.

The literature on women's roles in veterinary studies, in contrast, is quite limited. The available secondary literature is focused largely on the establishment of the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC). Alexander Ross and Terry Crowley provide some indication of the presence of female veterinary students in the OVC, while Eugene Gattinger's celebratory work on the OVC's first hundred years contains direct references to admissions policies that would have affected Edith.<sup>87</sup> Women were only permitted entry into the Veterinary Colleges in the 1930s, and there is little secondary material regarding women's roles in veterinary medicine. An analysis of Edith's letters regarding her veterinary education during the first decades of women's admission to the college and her experiences of veterinary residency is a valuable addition to the history of female veterinarians in North America.

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<sup>86</sup> Valverde, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Alexander M. Ross and Terry Crowley, The College on the Hill: A New History of the Ontario Veterinary College (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999); F. Eugene Gattinger, A Century of Challenge: A History of the Ontario Veterinary College (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

## Work and Family

The theme of women's work during the Canadian Great Depression is addressed in Edith's and Frieda correspondence throughout the 1930s. The literature regarding women's work in the context of the Canadian Depression presents conflicting perspectives on women's experience of the Depression. One side of the debate sees working women as victims of nation-wide systemic sexism, while the other side looks to women's agency during this decade. These discussions are reflected in the Fraser/Williams correspondence in that the correspondence reflects both systemic sexism as well as female agency.

Female agency is a theme highlighted by historian Katrina Srigley. With the aid of personal interviews she argues that the Depression was a positive experience for many women. Srigley encourages her readers to think of the Depression as an era defined by the employment of women, rather than the unemployment of men.<sup>88</sup> She contends that women were major players in the social and economic landscape in Depression era Toronto. Srigley's dissertation draws a complicated image of women's life experiences as affected by economics, an image that is affirmed in this dissertation. Srigley reveals that women's experiences of the Depression were shaped in different ways by marital status, racial identity, ethnic identity, and religious affiliation. Though her dissertation does not delve into some of her subjects' close female partnerships, her findings regarding female agency and work are valuable for this project.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Katrina Srigley "Working Lives and Simple Pleasures: Single, Employed Women in a Depression-Era City, 1929-1939" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2005), 2. Srigley has recently turned this dissertation into a book entitled, Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in Depression-Era City, 1929-1939 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Srigley interviewed one woman who lived decades of her life with another "dearly loved" woman, p. 56. Indeed, as Depression-era employment policies encouraged women to remain single, stressed homosocial

Arguing that antifeminist discourse shaped the course of Canadian women's lives during the Depression, historian Margaret Hobbs points to the difficulties that confronted working women.<sup>90</sup> Using national surveys and the media, Hobbs recalls the 1934 Chatelaine article "Go Home, Young Women" by Quebec politician Mederic Martin, who appealed to Canadian women to vacate the work force in the name of patriotism. At the same time, Hobbs highlights working women's views that women have always worked, they have just not been paid for it. Additionally, Hobbs acknowledges that during the Depression, most men would not do the work that women were doing, a position echoed by all of Srigley's respondents. Hobbs's account of systemic sexism is reflected in the slow pace of Frieda's career advancement and in Edith's experiences of farm life and veterinary studies. Hobbs's analysis remains at the level of statistics while Srigley's account, like this one, looks at the daily personal effects of the Depression.

### **Family**

The theme of family in relation to Edith's and Frieda's partnership is an important part of this dissertation. Frieda and Edith wanted children and imagined themselves as a family with two children. Canadian historian Suzanne Morton offers some historical perspective on non-heteronormative family structures. Morton's inquiry into the meanings of family asks the question, "What about families that are the result of choice?"<sup>91</sup> Morton's essay "To Take an Orphan: Gender and Family Roles Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion" analyzes approximately 400 surviving letters that addressed the

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working practices, and to forgo heterosexual marriage, a discussion of women's homosexuality in relation to her interviewees' lives might have broadened Srigley's already wide scope of subjects.

<sup>90</sup> Margaret Hobbs, "Equality and Difference: Feminism and the Defence of Women Workers during the Great Depression," *Labour/LeTravail* 32 (Fall 1993): 201-223.

<sup>91</sup> Suzanne Morton, "To Take an Orphan: Gender and Family Roles Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion," in *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* ed. Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan and Nancy M. Forestell (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999), 106-122.

adoption of the hundreds of orphaned children left in the aftermath of the 1917 Halifax explosion. Using these letters, Morton attempts to untangle the biological and social meanings of family and denotes the ways in which notions of non-biological parenthood complicated gendered definitions of mother and father. Morton suggests that these letters underscore the powerful link between discourses of femininity and motherhood, discourses that are also evident in Frieda and Edith's correspondence.

Morton's work presents a portrait of single women who wanted to adopt. She notes that the social acceptability of young single women with children was not universal and that unmarried women with children faced risks in terms of their sexual reputations. Through her analysis of these letters, Morton demonstrates that the diverse groups of adoption applicants understood the roles of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons in a way that transcended any strictly biological attachment to the definition of family. In this way, Morton proposes that these letters underscored the widespread notion of the importance of family relations and the fact that families could be formed in the absence of biological ties.<sup>92</sup>

Morton's fluid approach to defining family is also supported by historian Veronica Strong-Boag. Strong-Boag's analysis of Ontario adoption laws of the interwar years documents the provincial government's connection to the historical practice of informal adoption. In her examination of the history of Ontario's adoption laws, Strong-Boag suggests a growing trend towards increased provincial involvement and increased scrutiny of prospective adoptive parents. Strong-Boag notes that by the 1940s, the phrase "suitable family" was overwhelmingly interpreted to mean a married heterosexual

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<sup>92</sup> Morton, 121.

couple.<sup>93</sup> Thus, when exploring the historiography of scholarship on the history of Ontario family law, Strong-Boag concludes that in the Canadian context the definitions of family have not been fixed and these definitions were arguably more flexible in the early twentieth century than they were later.

### Chapter Synopsis

This dissertation is divided into an introductory chapter and four thematic chapters: “Corresponding Desires,” “Modern Culture and Sexual Identity,” “Doctors in Skirts: Passion and Profession,” and “Architectures of Desire: Keeping the Wolf at the Door.”

The second chapter, “Corresponding Desires,” explores how Edith and Frieda created and expressed their same-sex intimate desires as “devoted women” without naming their desire as “lesbian.” I suggest that the women’s use of the term “devoted” as a description of their sexual selves was a deliberate effort to distance themselves from the 1920s meaning of the word “lesbian.” This chapter then analyzes how Frieda and Edith, in naming themselves as “devoted,” came to define the meanings of “devotion” and the meanings of their desire. They defined themselves in relation to other “devoted” female couples and in relation to family, friends, co-workers and acquaintances. Additionally this chapter describes how Frieda and Edith strategized about how they would or would not be recognized as “devoted” by others and thus how they took pains in maintaining discretion of this most central part of their lives.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, “Corresponding Desires,” looks at how Edith and Frieda wrote about their desire in their letters. This

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<sup>93</sup> Strong-Boag, *Finding Families Finding Ourselves*, 139.

section focuses on their developing narrative of desire, which began with the use of the word “like” and moved to the use of the word “love.” Moreover, this part of the chapter suggests that the two women’s emotional connection was matched by their intimate physical connection.

Additionally this section explores the important role of the correspondence in the production of desire. The physical presence of the letters in the form of their frequency, I suggest, were imbued with the symbolic presence of the writer. This presence was charged erotically, as is evident in the women’s thrill of the letters’ potential discovery, the personal places in which the letters were saved, and literary devices such as asterisks, and double entendres that were employed by the women to simultaneously guard their budding desire and accelerate their passions.

The second part of this chapter contends that Frieda and Edith validated and affirmed their sense of their sexual selves as “devoted” in their connections with other “devoted” couples. I suggest that telling each other stories of other devoted couples and sharing their knowledge of other devoted couples in their social milieu were validating and mirroring experiences. I suggest that the act of writing about other couples relationships enhanced Frieda’s and Edith’s own desires and helped them shape their ideal devoted partnership.

The last section of this chapter explores Edith’s and Frieda’s partnership in relation to family, friends, co-workers and acquaintances. In this section I suggest that the correspondence was a site of resistance: in the actions of writing and reading their correspondence, in creating a narrative, in assuring the preservation of their correspondence, and in strategizing within the correspondence about how to maintain the



devoted partnership. In this chapter, I describe how Edith and Frieda strategized the discretionary course of their partnership in the belief that some would take objection to their relationship. Deciding who to tell and from whom to withhold were methods by which Edith and Frieda nurtured and protected their growing passionate relationship. Ultimately the preservation of their passions was key.

The third chapter, entitled “Modern Culture and Sexual Identity,” examines the Fraser/Williams correspondence in terms of the modern culture of the 1920s. In this chapter, I look to modern technology and the ways in which the Fraser/Williams correspondence was a product of these technologies. The first half of this chapter is focused on the ways that modern technology propelled the development of Edith’s and Frieda’s relationship. This chapter takes into account the inventions of the steamship, the global postal service, and modern pen production, all of which were elements that influenced the form of the Fraser/Williams correspondence. Modern technology was evident in the letters themselves. For example, Edith’s employment in a London typing pool was a function of modern technology while Frieda’s internship in obstetrics and residency tuberculosis was replete with the technologies of modern medical science.

Frieda and Edith were well aware of their place in modern culture, the focus of the second half of this chapter. Here I explain how modern culture shaped Edith’s and Frieda’s relationship. I describe this process by looking at three distinct areas of modern culture addressed by their correspondence. These areas were modern science, literature, and the theatre, all of which featured debates regarding same-sex intimate sexuality between women. In this context, I examine the degree to which the couple saw themselves reflected in modern cultural dialogues and the degree to which their sexual

self-identities were shaped by these dialogues. This chapter posits that as much as Edith and Frieda identified as modern women, they did not necessarily see themselves as entirely reflected in their modern culture. I also contend that their sexual self-perceptions as same-sex devoted women were not informed solely by the definitions of modern culture; they also were shaped by Edith's and Frieda's experiences of their desires. In this way, Edith and Frieda adopted a unique same-sex sexual identity that was adaptable to their modern lives.

The fourth chapter, entitled "Doctors in Skirts: Profession and Passion," looks to the Fraser/Williams correspondence in terms of Frieda's medical internship and Frieda's relationship to Edith. In this chapter I propose that Frieda's same-sex intimate relationship with Edith was a huge source of support for Frieda. In turn, Frieda's letters to Edith about her professional experiences strengthened their personal relationship. Frieda derived considerable emotional support from Edith. Frieda vented her frustrations to Edith and Edith was there with her in spirit. The number of letters sent back and forth during this time and the content of much of this correspondence demonstrated that Frieda involved Edith in her professional and her passionate life. Edith was an attentive listener who offered Frieda a supportive and non-judgmental ear. Frieda could freely complain, criticize and process. Additionally, Frieda drew diagrams and sketches that described her experiences as an intern. These sketches allowed Edith the experience of sharing Frieda's perceptions of her medical world. Thus in all these ways Frieda could feel supported and loved by Edith in what was for Frieda a challenging hospital environment.

Conversely, this chapter contends that Frieda's professional life aided the two women's personal lives. Frieda's professional life deepened the two women's intimacies.

The passion Frieda felt for Edith was reflected in her passion for her profession so much so that Frieda needed to share this part of herself with Edith. To this end, Frieda needed to keep Edith at her level of understanding. Additionally, Frieda's career offered the two women the potential freedom to maintain their devoted relationship, in the context of Frieda's career. Frieda and Edith could look forward to economic autonomy, independent of male support.

The fifth chapter, entitled "Architectures of Desire: Keeping the Wolf at the Door," looks at professionalism, partnership and family from the time of Frieda and Edith's return to Toronto in 1927 to the end of their correspondence in the 1940s. This chapter argues that Frieda and Edith, with some sacrifice, established a life long partnership that was integrated into the social and economic fabric of their lives. In my argument, I consider the material and social conditions that enabled two women to live out their desire in the form of a lifelong romantic partnership.

Edith and Frieda planned their lives in the form of an architectural design that comprised a representation of their desire. The imagined construction was a shared vision of their future and was organized around three themes: home, family and profession. Thus the first half of this chapter is entitled: "Imaginings." Here I explore the co-created imaginary space in the correspondence where Edith and Frieda played with ideas regarding their futures. For example, they imagined a future home wherein they co-parented twins and were supported by Frieda's medical profession. I suggest that these "imaginings" enabled the women to lay the groundwork for a well-planned partnership that sustained them in the context of the social and economic pressures of 1930s and 1940s Canada. The second section, entitled "Realities," looks at the remaining exchange

between Edith and Frieda in the 1930s and 1940s. This section analyzes the correspondence in terms of what actually transpired as Edith and Frieda attempted to turn their desires into reality. “Realities” is about how Edith and Frieda negotiated their family relationships and residencies, how they maintained economic independence in the 1930s and 1940s, and finally what actually transpired when a child did take her place in their home.

“Architectures of Desire” looks at the effect of change over time upon the relationship. Both halves of this chapter contend that economics and family played significant roles in shaping Edith and Frieda’s lives and that economics and family continued to dictate the shape of their sexual identities. The pressures of their respective families, middle-class cultural demands, and the stark economic realities of the Depression were so profound that they delayed the women’s living together full-time for almost a decade. Thus this chapter offers a portrait of a lesbian relationship that was by necessity a flexible one, with Edith and Frieda spending their time together on weekends. By the late 1930s, when Edith enrolled in Veterinary College, Frieda was as supportive of her as Edith had been of Frieda when Frieda was an intern in New York a decade earlier. Their correspondence in the 1930s served much the same purpose as in the 1920s, without the angst of losing their relationship. By the early 1940s, after Edith began her residency in Montreal, the two women were more closely linked. They had become professional comrades giving their partnership a formidable foundation that was bolstered by years of intimacy.

The Second World War brought the issue of family to the surface in a new way, by way of Edith’s and Frieda’s care for their “niece” Jenny Rodd, a refugee child from

war-torn London. The few letters that document the years that Edith and Frieda spent with Jenny at Frieda and Edith's home are poignant when linked to the hoped-for twins of their earlier correspondence.

In conclusion, this dissertation analyzes the intimate relationship produced by and reflected in the written correspondence between Frieda Fraser and Edith Bickerton Williams, arguably the largest correspondence of its kind in North America. The dissertation contends that Frieda's and Edith's correspondence was a place wherein the women created self-defined sexual identities that were in dialogue with their experiences of cultural discourses that defined the modern lesbian. I argue that Frieda and Edith referred to themselves as "devoted women," and that this designation marked their differentiation from the discourses of lesbianism in contemporary literature, science and the theatre. Moreover, I suggest the meanings that they attributed to their self-descriptions as "devoted women" were a direct result of the self-reflections in their correspondence.

In addition to offering an analysis of the development of a unique sexual subjectivity, which I refer to as "devoted women," this dissertation offers several important arguments regarding this particular "devoted" relationship. These arguments are presented thematically, across a breadth of life experiences, underscoring the fact that sexuality pervades all facets of one's life.

The first theme is letter-writing and desire. Edith's and Frieda's letter writing produced and enhanced their devoted desires. I suggest that the women created a narrative of their devotion that developed from "like" to "love" and coincided with the physical expression of their affections. I also argue that Edith and Frieda were agents of

their sexual subjectivity, choosing whom to tell, and from whom to withhold. I contend that the two women not only shaped the course of their own subjectivity as devoted women, but also protected their burgeoning desire from negative cultural messages that could be expressed by their social circles.

The second theme is North American modern technology and culture in the 1920s and their effects on the development of Frieda's and Edith's identity as "devoted women." I argue that modern technology propelled the development of their desire while modern culture, in terms of science, literature, and the theatre provided the discourse of the modern lesbian. Edith and Frieda constructed their identity as devoted women as an identity that was in dialogue with this discourse, and as a result of this dialogue they arrived at a self-description of a devoted partnership that worked for them.

The third theme is profession and passion. I argue that Frieda's challenging experiences in medical school were ameliorated by her daily correspondence with Edith. In addition, Frieda's sharing of her professional challenges deepened her passionate relationship with Edith. Moreover, the knowledge that Frieda would be able to provide financially enabled the women to envision a feasible future as a devoted couple. In later years, this pattern was repeated when Edith chose to pursue her professional career as a veterinarian. Edith wrote letters to Frieda that documented her professional development and garnered Frieda's emotional support. Moreover, Edith related to Frieda as a colleague creating a partnership that was linked professionally and passionately.

The last theme explored in this dissertation looks to the passage of time and the stability of family in relation to Frieda's and Edith's identities as "devoted women." Here I consider the material and social conditions in the home, family and professions that

enabled the two women to live out their desire. I argue that Edith and Frieda were eventually able to live out the dreams of their youth, albeit not exactly in the manner that they had imagined. They wanted to live together, but they felt they could not for a long time. They wanted twins but instead they fostered a child twenty years later. They looked forward to success in their professions; this they accomplished well enough to purchase a large home in their later years.

Through the exploration of all these themes, then, this dissertation presents a microscopic analysis of an extensive Canadian correspondence between two middle class white women in Toronto, Canada. The dissertation not only provides a Canadian context to the development of early twentieth century lesbian subjectivity, but also offers a rare glimpse into the development of a unique self-description of same-sex sexual partnership. This project demonstrates how two women wrote their desires and in so doing developed a nuanced sexual subjectivity that engaged with their modern culture, benefitted their professional development, and allowed them to navigate the problems and possibilities of “devoted women” in Canada in the early twentieth century.

## Chapter 2

### Corresponding Desires

This chapter analyzes the ways in which Edith's and Frieda's correspondence defined, influenced, and enhanced their desire for each other, which in turn affected, molded, and shaped their identities and their relationship. It argues that as their desires developed, primarily in the context of their writing, the two women developed a sense of themselves as sexual partners and "devoted women." In this chapter I explore how Frieda's and Edith's letters in the mid-1920s established their relationship as an erotic, same-sex, life partnership. In turn, the meanings that Edith and Frieda applied to their relationship were critical to their emergent sexual identities.

The letters were the place where Frieda and Edith named their affection, first as friends, then as lovers, and then as life partners. The letters were not just a "blank page" wherein affection was inscribed, but a material space where the two women developed their love and passion. The letters' regular appearance sustained and maintained the women's emotional connection, which was particularly important because the two women rarely saw one another in this period. The letters enhanced the women's desires in the context of their physical separation. Frieda and Edith's absence from one another's everyday lives helped produce their desires, which were generated, enhanced, and expressed in their correspondence.

The letters also served as a place where the two women could "talk" about the nature of their relationship vis-a-vis other devoted women. Other female couples provided Frieda and Edith with opportunities to conceptualize, define, and compare their own relationship. In describing who they were to each other and who they were not, in



comparison to other devoted women, Frieda and Edith used their letters to explore the nature of their relationship. The letters also bolstered their desires in the context of cultural discourses that did not recognize women's devoted partnerships.

This chapter, then, examines how Edith and Frieda created and expressed their desires in their correspondence. In the first section, entitled "Corresponding Desires," I examine how the two women described their developing passions for each other and how they employed their correspondence in a way that described, produced, and enhanced their desires. Their letters began with the use of the word "like," then shifted in referring to "love" and proceeded to describe their love. These descriptions were at first exclusively emotional, but later they were infused with intimations of intimate physical connection. After a year of separation, the women met for a few days, during which the correspondence suggests that they were physically intimate. Thus this section describes how without naming their desire as "lesbian," Edith and Frieda arrived at a sense of themselves as intimately devoted to each other.

Why did Edith and Frieda refer to themselves as "devoted women" and not use the term "lesbian" to name their desire? Certainly the word "lesbian" was available as a self-description, but Edith and Frieda opted for the term "devoted" to describe their relationship and other same-sex relationships that they believed to be like their own. Why? Socially and historically, Edith's and Frieda's choice of the term "devoted" to describe their relationship is reflective of Elizabeth Kennedy's argument that many white middle class women of the interwar years were uncomfortable with the use of the word

“lesbian.”<sup>1</sup> Edith and Frieda wrote letters at a transitional time in the history of sexuality when the meanings of women’s same-sex sexuality were in the process of negotiation at personal and cultural levels. The 1920s discourse of the modern “lesbian” was one that largely differentiated lesbians from other women, medicalized women-loving-women as diseased, and pathologized women who sexually desired other women. Middle-class white women like Frieda and Edith, by naming their intimate same-sex relationship as “devoted,” dissociated themselves from the pathologized moniker of “lesbian.” Their personal terminology engaged with larger cultural meanings and allowed them to identify as “devoted women” within their social milieu. Indeed, Edith’s and Frieda’s conception of “devoted women,” distinct from the cultural meaning of “lesbian,” worked in a way that maintained their social connections within their society, members of which otherwise might not want to associate with “lesbians.” Calling themselves “devoted women” allowed Frieda and Edith to make the nature of their relationship discreetly public and sexually ambiguous. The attribution of “devoted” also carried cultural connotations of moral and spiritual calling, as in the French term “*devotee*.” A devoted woman was pure, while a “lesbian” was depraved. Indeed, during the writing of the correspondence, Edith and Frieda did not think of themselves or the same-sex couples in their society as lesbian.

The attribution of the moniker “devoted women” as a public identity is explored in the second section of this chapter, “Seeing Other Devoted Couples.” It is from the act of naming other women couples as “devoted” that we know how Edith and Frieda named themselves. Here Edith’s and Frieda’s desires were described and produced by telling and retelling the stories of other devoted women. Edith and Frieda recognized, and in turn

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “But We Would Never Talk about It’: The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South-Dakota, 1928-1933,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 15-40.

were recognized, by other devoted couples. In so doing they developed a sense of their relationship as similar to other same-sex relationships, which helped validate their ideas about themselves and their desires. Through writing about other devoted women's experiences, Frieda and Edith enhanced their desires for each other. Additionally, this section emphasizes that the correspondence provided a space for Frieda and Edith to compare other devoted couples with themselves. These comparisons helped them fashion their ideal devoted partnership in relation to their perceptions of other devoted couples.

The third section of this chapter explores how the Fraser/Williams correspondence became a site of resistance to cultural oppression and also a place wherein Edith and Frieda strategized about how to present and preserve their devoted partnership. This section explores Frieda's and Edith's use of discretion in presenting themselves as devoted women to family and friends, taking into account the fact that larger cultural discourses were often enacted through the reactions of the people closest to the two women. This final section documents sexual desire and behaviour in relation to sexual identity and personal privacy. It highlights the fact that what was paramount to the two women was that they preserve their devoted relationship in the context of their familial, social, and cultural worlds.

### **Corresponding Desires**

The Fraser/Williams correspondence was a core component of the two women's intimate same-sex relationship. This section analyzes how Frieda's and Edith's almost daily correspondence from 1925 to 1927 described, produced, and sustained their desires for each other. The women's letters indicate that they began their correspondence after Frieda started her internship in New York in 1924. But they had known each other long

before then. The correspondence of 1925-26 suggests that eight years earlier, in 1917-1918, Frieda and Edith had become close in the Theta sorority at the University of Toronto. At this time, the two women formed a relationship that they called a “lease of affection,” which conveyed their sense that their commitment was serious but not necessarily permanent. Despite the fact that Edith quit university after two years, the two women remained close, even renewing the “lease” after four years. The women’s mid-1920s letters also suggest that Edith and Frieda corresponded with each other between 1917 and 1924, though these letters were not saved. The fact that they began saving their letters in 1925, when Edith was sent away to England, signaled the growing importance of their relationship. These letters recorded and fostered emotional changes in how the two women related to each other. Their correspondence was a place in which their passions thrived and a medium in which they made meaning out of their desires.

The Oxford Dictionary of English (OED) states that as a noun the word “desire” refers to a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen. The same word, the OED notes, can also reference a strong sexual feeling or appetite. When used with an object, “desire” can be used as a verb, as in to desire someone sexually or to strongly wish for or want something.<sup>2</sup> The Fraser/Williams correspondence suggests that Edith’s and Frieda’s desires were sexual and also transcended the sexual to encompass friendship, intimacy, love, and passion. Edith and Frieda wanted to be with each other all of the time, while at the same time they were the objects of their sexual desires. The two women wrote about their deep need to be with each other physically in a way that, at least for the first year of their correspondence, they never actually experienced. In this context, they regularly envisioned their reunification

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<sup>2</sup> “desire, n.” [OED Online](#), March 2014, Web. 20 March 2014.

and they came to name their passion for each other as devotion. In this period they began to refer to themselves as “devoted women.” This became evident when referring to other women couples.

Indeed, in one of the first letters of their saved correspondence, Edith remarked to Frieda that she had met two women who were devoted to each other. In July 1925, from aboard ship on her way to England, she wrote:

Bess [Edith’s sister] picked up the nicest women from the hospital on board – two nurses, Miss Brown and Miss Scadding. They are head nurses at T.G.H. [Toronto General Hospital] and quite old - about 45! They are very devoted to each other which is enough to make me interested in them even if they are such perfect lambs. I was quite thrilled when they said that they had known each other for years and had always planned this trip and had only managed it this year, and you could tell by the way they looked at each other, just how thrilled they were. Do you know them by any chance?<sup>3</sup>

Edith had been sent away by her family to assist her aging aunts and take her away from Frieda. At this early point in the correspondence, Edith and Frieda had not yet described themselves as devoted women. Nor had they declared their love or discussed forming a long-term partnership. Edith, however, initiated a conversation with Frieda about devoted women by making a comment about an older female couple whom she perceived to be together and in love. It is likely that Edith was interested in these women because there was something about them that was similar to her own relationship with Frieda or the relationship she hoped to have with Frieda.

As is discussed below, Frieda’s response indicated that she knew the two nurses, but interestingly she moved quickly from that acknowledgement to a discussion of how much she missed Edith. Indeed the first few letters of the women’s correspondence discussed how much they missed each other and moved quickly to discussions of the

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<sup>3</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 July 1925, File 3, Box 010, Fraser Family Personal Records (FFPR) University of Toronto.

pleasures of “liking” each other. Over the next several months, the two women repeatedly mentioned how much they “liked” each other, but by the end of 1925 they were talking about “love.”

From the time Edith parted with Frieda in summer 1925, the women wrote letters that expressed and produced their deepening emotional connection. This process began with descriptions of the pain and sorrow of their separation, continued with expressions of despair and longing, transitioned to comments about how much they “liked” each other, and finally concluded with the regular use of the word “love.” Once Edith and Frieda referred to their feelings in terms of love, the women then began to describe their love’s distinct devotional qualities, followed by references to dreams of physical intimacy.

Edith’s first letter expressed her regret about not having visited Frieda in northern Ontario before Edith left for England. From aboard ship en route to Britain, Edith wrote:

It just makes me sick to think that I might have gone up with you for an odd day or so, and just hadn’t the backbone to go against my family in the matter. I simply despise myself when I do that kind of thing, but I suppose it would have been a bit silly to insist, especially as there might have been complications with your family.<sup>4</sup>

Frieda had been vacationing with her family in Go Home Bay, Ontario, but familial “complications” made a visit problematic for both women. This letter conveyed the constricted position in which Edith found herself. She wanted to see Frieda, but was afraid of the conflict with both families that her visit might have caused. Now that it was too late and she was on her way to London, Edith felt and expressed her regret.

Frieda also wrote about missing Edith. In another letter, a month after Edith’s departure, Frieda wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 July 1925, File 3, Box 010, FFPR.

This whole business of being away from you is hellish and there is no ever pretending about it, I do manage to forget occasionally but when I remember again it is so awful I could just scream. And the rest of the time is just a larger, outside ache for you. It is just a month since I saw you but I'm thinking much more of the six months until I do again.<sup>5</sup>

Frieda's description of missing Edith vividly conveyed her connection to Edith. Without Edith, Frieda felt herself to be in a veritable "hell." She described their separation as "awful" and indicated that she "ached" for Edith.

To ease the pain of separation, Frieda wrote that she thought about Edith a great deal. This was a way for Frieda to impart her growing affection. Frieda stated this in the following passage, letting Edith know how thrilling it was to "like" her. Frieda wrote in July, just days after Edith's departure:

Not that I don't think of you rather continuously and fairly intensely, Oh my lamb, I'm so thrilled at being able to like you even a little.<sup>6</sup>

Edith allowed Frieda to "like" her even "a little." Shortly after this, in another letter, Frieda asked Edith's permission to like her and think about her. Having permission from Edith implied that it was suitable to like each other in this intense way. Frieda wrote from New York, a few weeks after Edith's departure:

Dear Lamb: There is nothing to write about and pencil isn't the pleasantest thing to read but it is just another phase of letting my mind rest on you and it seems to take a lot of resting. If you don't like it I wish you would tell me.<sup>7</sup>

Edith and Frieda initially used the word "like" to describe the intensity of their desire. The amount of "like" started with "a little," but Frieda's description of her thoughts of Edith as "continuous" and "intense" suggested a more heightened level of emotion.

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<sup>5</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 25 July 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>6</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 9 July 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>7</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, New York, n.d. Sept. 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

In one September 1925 letter, for example, Frieda acknowledged the pleasure she felt in having such strong feelings of attachment: “Isn’t it funny that we are attached to each other? Damned nice for me I must say!”<sup>8</sup> In her use of the word “funny,” Frieda implied how unusual their relationship might be, but she nevertheless stressed the fact that no matter how “funny,” being attached was absolutely fine with her. The state of attachment, however, continued between the women with more frequent use of the word “like.” Indeed, until the very end of 1925, Edith and Frieda largely maintained the use of the word “like” to describe their feelings for each other, notwithstanding the occasional use of the word “love,” most often in the closing of their letters. For example, Frieda closed the above letter by writing, “Dear, I’m getting much too sleepy to write, but I did want to send you my love in case it might be acceptable – I see no likelihood at the moment of its diminishing. Awkward isn’t it?”<sup>9</sup>

The women used the word “like” despite the fact that they had acknowledged that they missed each other terribly, they had experienced physical effects because of their separation, and they had discussed a deepening attachment. The word “like,” when used in conjunction with Frieda’s descriptions of her thoughts of Edith, imparted a sense of love and desire, yet the women’s reticence at using the word “love” to describe their feelings masked the deep significance of what they felt at this point.

Why the obfuscation? Edith explained this almost a year later, in May 1926, six months after the women declared their love for each other:

I had been careful for ages of what I said to you for fear it would turn into something you might be ashamed of. It is a great relief that you have the same

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<sup>8</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 30 September 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>9</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 30 September 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.



feeling – I know it doesn't matter now – not that I ever felt that it did really, but it would be horrid to make a remark that you would consider unseemly.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, Edith acknowledged that her strong feelings for Frieda and Frieda's for her might be viewed as unseemly or shameful by some. Consideration or fear of the other's imagined reactions guided the women's careful descriptions. That same fear was likely part of Edith's and Frieda's motivations for their use of the ambiguous word "like" to describe their feelings for each other. The meaning of "like" was not so forward as to scare the other off, yet the word still held promise.

The word "hard" was also used by the women to modify how much they "liked" each other. For example, in October 1925, Frieda described her feeling of liking Edith as "hard," writing, "Darling I like you sometimes quite hard – like now."<sup>11</sup> The word "hard" implied several things. "Hard" meant intense, as in difficult to bear, it meant solid, and it also carried a sexual connotation as in the hardness of an erection. Two days later, in another letter, Frieda continued to emphasize the "hardness" of her "liking." This time she implied that "hard" meant difficult and she felt the experience of it as a problem:

O my Lamb – I'm liking you quite hard and I don't know what to do about it. What would you suggest? It happens often enough to be a serious problem. My love to you darling. F<sup>12</sup>

Thus, for Frieda, the word "hard" implied difficulty in tolerating the feeling of "liking" Edith. Nevertheless, the double entendre of the word "hard" remained, and through it Frieda conveyed an erotic desire that accompanied the word "like."

Edith answered Frieda's concerns regarding their emotional experiences. Edith wrote about the "hardness" of liking in December 1925:

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<sup>10</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 May 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>11</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 25 October 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>12</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 October 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

I agree with you about liking you-or me-hard. Something should be done but 6 months thought on the subject has not brought me to any conclusions. I like it most of the time because it isn't enough to be really painful, but quite often, I get took.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Edith matched Frieda's explanation of how Frieda felt. The intensity of the word "like" increased by increments on both sides of the correspondence. The two women told each other that "liking" had remained difficult and was at times painful.

In December 1925 Edith summed up their situation, while recalling an earlier [spoken] discussion:

Do you remember saying that after we had been away from each other three months it wouldn't be bad although that first three might be rather painful, and that after six we wouldn't mind at all really? As far as I am concerned, you're quite wrong. The first three months were bad enough but not any worse than the second three. And now at the end of six-do you know it is six months today since we've seen each other? --I miss you like hell and quite as consistently and a bit more intensely at times than I did at first. It is really an awful waste of time being away from you.<sup>14</sup>

Edith came to a realization that her strong affections for Frieda had not diminished.

Because of this she concluded that their being apart therefore did not make sense. Indeed their relationship was intensified by their admissions of their need for each other.

Moreover, Edith and Frieda's deepening connection provided opportunities for the two women to explore the nature of their identities and selves. In late December, Edith wrote:

What do think it would be like if I died on you? It occurred to me that I would have to ask your permission to die as I can't call my soul my own!<sup>15</sup>

In this passage Edith acknowledged her connection to Frieda as one that was spiritual and encompassed her soul.

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<sup>13</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 29 December 1925, File 03, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>14</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 18 December 1925, File 03, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>15</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, London, 2 December 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

With the acknowledgement of the spiritual depth of their affections and the realization that time and distance did not dissipate their deep attachment, Edith told Frieda that she loved her. In the following letter, likely written in late December, Frieda and Edith settled upon the word “love.” The passage suggests that Edith first told Frieda that she loved her on the telephone and that Frieda’s response was “I know.” Edith wrote:

Anyway you said today that you know it, However I’m going to tell you again—I love you, beloved, so utterly and intensely that it looks as if it were going to be forever.  
With every bit of me, B.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Edith described the extent of her love for Frieda. The word “love” is discussed in the body of the letter (not just in the closing) and the quality of their love, noted here as utterly intense, became a subject of their letters’ consideration.

Once Edith and Frieda declared their love, Edith told Frieda that she could imagine kissing her in public. In the same letter, Edith wrote:

I’m so thrilled about loving you and vice versa. If you were about, I should probably fall on your neck in the street and kiss you, and disgrace you publicly.<sup>17</sup>

This letter was unusual because of its early discussion of physical connection, but it foreshadowed later references to physical affection.

Despite the fact that Edith and Frieda admitted their love and that Edith wrote about kissing Frieda, the two women largely discussed their love in terms of their connection to the other’s letters. Edith wrote in January 1926 that she was only happy when she was in possession of an unread letter from Frieda:

The only happy moments I have are when I get a letter from you and am too busy to read it at the moment. Then I keep it in my pocket and when my hands are not otherwise engaged, I find myself clutching it as if I might lose it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, London, n.d. December 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Correspondingly, Edith's fears of losing her happiness were connected to her fears of losing the letters. Edith additionally noted that she found her attachment to Frieda's letters troubling and that she would never have behaved like this before. She continued in the same letter, "Lord if any one had told me some year ago that I would descend to such depths of imbecility or that would admit to anyone that I had!<sup>19</sup> Naming her need to hold tightly to the letter as "decending into the depths of imbecility," Edith also believed that her connection with Frieda engendered change, turning her into a romantic fool.

By summer 1926, Edith and Frieda began to make more suggestive physical references regarding the other. One letter from Frieda linked her attachment to the letters to physical feelings in her body. Upon receiving a pack of letters at the hospital in New York, Frieda wrote:

Dear do you know they caused me an esophageal spasm which I think is possibly synonymous with the well-known and deservedly popular lump in the throat. They also gave me several other sensations which it isn't necessary to go in to.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage Frieda reacted with tears to letters from Edith but she also indicated that she derived erotic sensations and left the details to Edith's imagination. The physical intensity increased. By mid-June 1926 the women were writing that they imagined themselves sleeping with the other. In one letter, Edith imagined Frieda in bed with her:

The night before last I made some remarks in the night which were reported to me with much amusement in the morning, Mollie [a flatmate] having taken for granted they were made in my sleep. I didn't enlighten her—I had hoped that she was asleep when I came to my senses and realized that you weren't there.<sup>21</sup>

Frieda also imagined herself in bed with Edith, as she wrote in June 1926:

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<sup>18</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser 14 January 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. June 1926.

<sup>21</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 June 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

One night I came down from the delivery room dripping with heat exhaustion at about 3am and began to apologize quite seriously to you for not bathing before, and went back to bed.<sup>22</sup>

In this passage, Frieda wrote that she was so tired that she apologized to an imaginary Edith for not bathing before coming to bed. In her imagined apology, Frieda implied that she usually bathed before going to bed with Edith and thus she also envisioned herself as regularly sleeping with Edith. These passages indicate that the two women wished they were in bed with the other, wishes that were no doubt desire-producing.

In addition to acknowledging their physical desires in their correspondence, Edith and Frieda ruminated and reflected on changes that they noticed in themselves and each other. In March 1926, Frieda wrote,

Neither of us will ever know what I am really like—Thank God. But I wish you could find out the unpleasant pieces and be done with it once and for all, only perhaps there will new ones as time goes on.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage Frieda wrote that only Edith was able to understand Frieda and thereby help her to know herself. Frieda feared her negative qualities, but she indicated that she wanted even the unpleasant parts to be known and accepted by Edith. Frieda additionally conveyed the sense that she felt she might develop even more troubling aspects, hopefully to be uncovered by Edith.

Edith's and Frieda's self-reflections are supported by literary theorist Marlene Kadar description of self-reflection in life-writing. Kadar notes that the constant self-reflection in life-writing can attain a contemplative quality that results in the disclosure of a core self beneath the public self. Kadar names this process *askesis*, a remembering of

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<sup>22</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. June 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>23</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 3 March 1926, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

the secret self whereby the self is revealed through life writing.<sup>24</sup> When the process of self-knowing involves a written conversation, the result is what is called an “intimate dyadic exchange.”<sup>25</sup> Edith’s and Frieda’s letters were vehicles for their developing self-perceptions, places in which each woman could reveal herself to herself and also discover her deepest feelings for the other. Elucidating this point, literary critic Carolyn G. Heilbrun notes that “identity is grounded through relation to the chosen other and that without such relation, women do not feel able to write openly about themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

The difference between how Edith and Frieda previously related to each other and how the two women connected in the mid-1920s became particularly evident in their discussions of whether or not to renew their sorority-based lease of affection. Eight years earlier, as sorority sisters at the University of Toronto, Frieda and Edith had agreed on a renewable “lease of affection.” They renewed the lease four years later, but after another four years they were ready for something more permanent. In February 1926, writing from London, Edith asked:

I didn’t know that it was possible to miss anyone so much, or that I could love you quite so violently. The end of our second four years’ expires this year--what about a new lease and for how long?<sup>27</sup>

A few weeks later, in March, Frieda answered Edith’s query with questions regarding the lease and its possible meaning:

Suppose we renew the lease as before? What would happen if we didn’t renew it? I don’t believe I’ve thought of that as a possibility. O my lamb can’t you see what it is that I can’t say? Do you think that I shall blow up with it?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Marlene Kadar, “Whose Life is it Anyway?” in *Essays in Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 157.

<sup>25</sup> Marlene Kadar, 159.

<sup>26</sup> Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: Norton, 1988), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 February 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>28</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 2 March 1926, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

What was it that Frieda wanted Edith to see, but that Frieda couldn't say, so much so that Frieda felt she was going to blow up? I suggest that Frieda was trying to tell Edith how much she loved her beyond the assurances of a renewable lease. Frieda did so near the end of March 1926:

Oh Lamb, I love you to distraction. Treatment is expectant as all the textbooks say which means there is nothing to be done about it at present. A neat phrase don't you think? It covers 99.5% of obstetrics. Possibly more.<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, Frieda described the extent of her love of Edith with the aid of medical terminology. I believe that this was one of the first times that Frieda described her devotion to Edith. Moreover, I believe that the women's discussion of the lease prompted Frieda to express the depth of her passion. Three days later, on 27 March, Frieda explained that a lease was pointless if it could be broken, implying that she needed more commitment than provided by a lease. Frieda wrote from New York:

What is the idea in renewing the lease and then losing it? I wish you would consider the matter seriously, the next few years are the years in which you should strike out for yourself. So do not come to a hasty decision and renew the thing when a little more care would let you view the question in a different light.<sup>30</sup>

Here Frieda hinted at the type of permanent commitment she had in mind. She counseled Edith to make a serious decision and to not take their relationship lightly. In her letter Frieda asked that Edith be aware of all her options before choosing her. The subject of the lease prompted Edith and Frieda to consider their futures and the meaning of their feelings. The lease was not renewed nor discussed any further.

By June 1926, Frieda was able to write clearly to Edith about the depth of her devotion without medical embellishments:

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<sup>29</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 24 March 1926, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>30</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 March 1926, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

If it were possible to long for you with all my being and yet be perfectly happy that would be it. Or If I'm not careful I'll be saying something highfalutin and poetic that you'll be ashamed of. But oh Edith I love you utterly.<sup>31</sup>

Here Frieda told Edith that she longed for her with her entire being. She aligned her emotional attachment for Edith with the bodily feeling of longing. Frieda was also guarded, or perhaps flirtatious, in leaving to Edith's imagination what Frieda might say as "poetic and highfalutin." Nevertheless, Frieda assured Edith of the entirety of her love.

In September, after more than a year of separation, Edith finalized her plans to visit Frieda. Anticipating their rendezvous, Edith wrote with playful erotic banter:

I am having an awful time finding some way of keeping up my stockings. My skirts are too short to roll them and I can't keep them from wrinkling around my ankles with garter above my knees. I fear that I'll have to take to corsets of some kind but I'll try to put it off until after I have seen you – it distances you so.<sup>32</sup>

This implied that she did not want distance between Frieda and that which Frieda might find beneath her corsets. After sending this letter, Edith sailed to Toronto from London on a five-week visit, the highlight of which was four days with Frieda at her family's camp at Go-Home. Edith and Frieda's meeting was a culmination of what had been shaped, defined, and produced in the almost daily letters of the past year. Edith wrote about the importance of this event in coming to terms with their devotion over the long term. On her way back to London in August 1926, Edith wrote:

Oh dear lamb, the last five weeks have been heaven for me! And its thrilling that it has all taken such a long time—nine years is a long time for this kind of thing—because we'd mistrust it so if we had just leapt into it wouldn't we?"<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, Edith indicated that a change in their relationship had occurred and that it had taken nine years for the two women to acknowledge, shape, and define their desires

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<sup>31</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. June 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>32</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, n.d. September 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>33</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 24 August 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.



into the relationship that they understood as devoted. From Edith's perspective, absence had made their hearts grow fonder. In the next letter, written a week later, Edith wrote more specifically about her physical encounter with Frieda during their rendezvous:

My best beloved – it is simply hell to be away from you just as it is heaven to be with you. It is the most satisfactory complete thing that I can imagine, and I don't think that it is possible for anyone to be happier or to find anything better than that four days at Go-Home. I love you without any reservations and more than I would have believed it possible to do – I adore you - and it must be for always because I don't see how there could be any me without it.<sup>34</sup>

This is Edith's declaration of love to Frieda. Edith's heartfelt affirmation indicated that her sense of self was attached to Frieda in such a way that she felt fulfilled only when in Frieda's presence. Edith described this as heaven. She continued,

I am yours absolutely, and to have you want me makes it quite perfect. It was all your idea and I shall be eternally grateful to you for teaching me, not to mention all the other things you have done for me. Dear Lamb, I am at your feet.<sup>35</sup>

Here Edith suggested that Frieda was the instigator of their same-sex intimacies. Edith additionally wrote that she was “at Frieda's feet,” having been “taught” by her.

In response, Frieda challenged Edith's claim that the conduct of their meeting was completely Frieda's idea:

Do you really think it was all my idea? I am sorry for that –I had hoped a little bit at least was yours. But I have given it to you, if you like. It is all yours really because it couldn't have existed without you. Isn't it lucky there was you!<sup>36</sup>

In this exchange, Frieda wrote that she hoped that Edith was going to take some credit for their emotional and physical relationship, insisting that their devoted relationship was a co-creation.

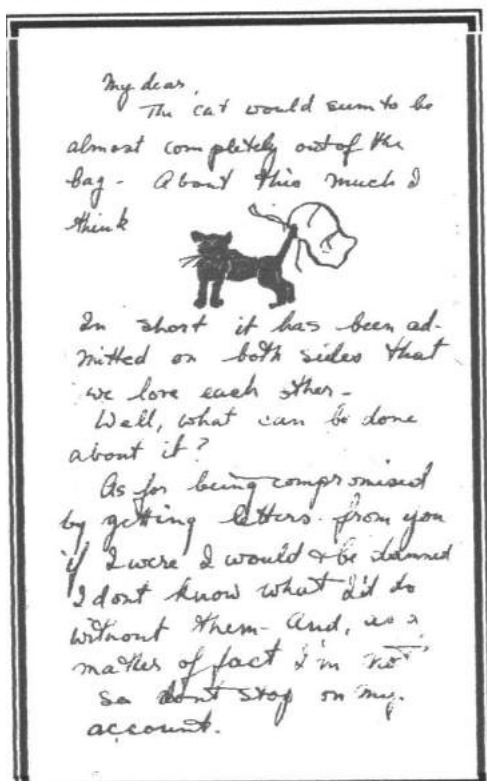
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<sup>34</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 8 September 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>35</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith William, 10 October 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

A slightly earlier letter from Frieda highlighted the significance of the women's rendezvous at Go-Home. In this letter Frieda responded to Edith's declaration of "love without reservation" with a drawing of a black cat jumping out of a bag. Beside the picture, Frieda wrote, "My dear --The cat would seem to be almost completely out of the bag -- about this much I think. In short, it has been admitted on both sides that we love each other."<sup>37</sup>



Frieda drew the cat on all fours, looking out of the page. She depicted the cat waving a white flag (perhaps signaling surrender to desire, perhaps indicating attention to desire) with its tail. The implication was that as long as the cat remained in the bag, Frieda's and Edith's feelings for each other remained ambiguous. But once the cat was let out of bag the fact of their devotion was irrevocable and unambiguous—there was no going back.

<sup>37</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith William, 26 September 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

Edith's and Frieda's assertions of enduring romantic and physical love after their stay at Go-Home were the culminations of the powerful affections that they had developed over the past year in their correspondence.

Indeed, letters written after their meeting at Go-Home confirmed this. The letters suggest that the two women did sleep together, as they had hoped, and that they had also spent all of their four days together. Edith wrote en route back to London:

You have evidently taught me your trick of not minding which way I face when I'm asleep—I didn't realize it until last night and it was most pleasant. Living with you has made me very sloppy because I found I forgot to make up my mouth.<sup>38</sup>

In this letter, Edith expressed contentment that she had slept with Frieda. Moreover, Edith noted how happy she was to “live with Frieda” and that this made her very sloppy, as she “forgot to make up her mouth.” This was the first occasion in which Edith referred to living with Frieda.

After the women's holiday at Go-Home, Frieda and Edith continued to discuss living together as an element of their relationship. Edith wrote:

I suppose coming to live with you won't count as getting married though. Isn't it sickening? We shan't get presents and they would be so useful! At least some of them would. Anyways darling, I shall give you a present- I saw it in a shop the other day. I hope no one buys it in the meantime.<sup>39</sup>

Edith's letter revealed that even if she did live with Frieda their devoted relationship would still not “count” as marriage. Significantly Edith used the word “sickening” to describe how she felt about this, which signaled her rejection of social convention and social exclusion. She quickly maneuvered, however, to a lighter aspect of the marriage ceremony—gifts. By stating that she would give Frieda a gift, Edith implied that she at

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<sup>38</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 24, September 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>39</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 16 October 1926, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

least recognized that their devoted relationship was as deserving of celebratory gifts and public recognition.

In addition to affirming their enjoyment in living together, the letters indicated the dissipation of a great deal of tension. For example, Edith wrote about their weekend in the woods:

I am passionately attached to your old sweater, I suppose. I washed it yesterday morning and I wish you could have seen the filth--we must have been awfully dirty at Go-Home.<sup>40</sup>

This displayed a combination of humour, happiness, and passion. Edith happily noted her attachment to Frieda's sweater and therefore to Frieda. In addition, Edith's light-hearted double entendre, her claim that they had been "awfully dirty," heightened and eroticized her expression of passion.

The passionate exchanges to each other continued throughout the correspondence. The women continued to address each other as "lambie" "darling" and "beloved" and they continued to claim their undying love. More than a year later, for example, Frieda wrote: "My dear, do you know that I love you so much that I wonder how it all exists? I should think I or you would burst with it."<sup>41</sup>

The letters were more than just a medium of their devotional messages. The two women expressed and defined their desire to each other in their letters, and they employed the materiality of the letters in the creation, enhancement, and definition of their devoted relationship.

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<sup>40</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, n.d. September 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>41</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 June 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

### **Material Passion in the Correspondence**

The materiality of the correspondence was instrumental in the production and development of Edith's and Frieda desires. This was achieved in a number of ways. These included regularity, repetition, immediacy, and symbolic erotic connection. The regular appearance of the letters in each woman's life, for instance, repeatedly recalled the presence of the other. The letters followed each woman to where she worked and where she lived, transforming the letters into physical symbols of the presence of the other as well as symbolizing intimate knowledge of each other's daily life. The letters' frequent arrivals were constant reminders of unflinching same-sex intimate affection.

The women's musings were immediate--written from the office, the lab, or the bedside table. Edith and Frieda regularly described their worlds and their feelings to each other. The frequency and consistency of the correspondence also kept the relationship in focus and directed the gaze of the beloved. Each new letter was a renewal of the other's passion. If either woman's imagination was to wander, whether in fantasy regarding the love relationship or its diminishment, the constancy of the letters acted as a control. If either woman's imagination faded regarding the other's affections, another letter arrived as a regular reminder that the love was still there. In one letter for example, Edith remarked:

It is rather nice to think that letters I write one day will reach you the next now isn't it? Or that if I want to know if you still like me I can be reassured in two days!<sup>42</sup>

In this example, Edith noted that the regular appearance of their letters affirmed and maintained her emotional connection with Frieda. The women's connection was re-established over and over again in their letters.

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<sup>42</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 7 July 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

The letters contained Edith's and Frieda's almost daily descriptions and comparisons of their thoughts and experiences and samples of remembered conversations; all were written in the context of their growing love for each other. For example, quotidian details were often coupled with wishes for the other's physical presence. For example, Edith linked the events of her outer daily world to her inner experience of missing Frieda. Edith wrote from aboard ship in 1926:

There has been a bright sun and a swell wind and it all looks so perfectly beautiful that I simply ache for you every time I look at the sea.<sup>43</sup>

In this sense, Edith described the immediate moment as she looked over the ocean in a way that expressed her simultaneous feeling for Frieda.

Repetition was manifested in Edith's and Frieda's continual reiteration of whom they were to each other--that they were "devoted" and what their devotion meant to each other. Named by Judith Butler as "iterability," the repeated performance of one's sexual identity is important, particularly in lesbian life-writing.<sup>44</sup> Edith's and Frieda's descriptions of their feelings toward each other became a narrative of the discovery of the meanings of their sexual selves. Thus every letter affirmed the growing development of their desire, highlighting the letters' individual importance in their re-iteration of their sexual identities as devoted women. Each letter contributed to the development of a narrative of their devotion that was evidenced by the letters' sheer quantity.

Moreover, the women infused the materiality of the letters with the erotic. The correspondence suggests that the daily arrival of the letters, whether at work or home, was accompanied by risks of discovery by co-workers or family members. Indeed the physical presence of the letters was charged with an eroticism connected to the thrill of

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<sup>43</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 3 October 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (New York: Routledge, 1993), 95.

discovery. This was evident early on in the correspondence, in July 1925, when Frieda wrote to Edith at her aunt's home in England:

My lamb, Cousin Lucy will certainly think you have a lover if I continue to write to you at such short intervals.<sup>45</sup>

And Edith responded to Frieda at the hospital:

I must stop, I hope that the hospital won't think that you have a lover by the frequency of my letters.<sup>46</sup>

The implication or suggestion was that the letters' frequency *could* betray the presence of a potential lover. And Frieda and Edith, by their continuous writing, arguably wanted outsiders to think of their correspondence as the letters of lovers. If outsiders suspected or believed that they were lovers, that made the idea of a devoted relationship more plausible for the two women.

The implications of the letters' persistent arrival became more overt a year later, when this was deemed more compromising and the cause of "sinking" the receiver.

Frieda wrote from New York in July of 1926:

My dear Bud, It is to be hoped that another letter or two more from me will not compromise you. In any case you are going to have them. You must be pretty well sunk by now with your family as far as that goes.<sup>47</sup>

Edith answered from Toronto:

Please don't stop writing to me because I'm at home - it won't compromise me and I have already settled the question of you with my family this time.<sup>48</sup>

In these examples, Frieda and Edith were aware that the constant arrival of their letters publicized their growing relationship to their families. The fact that Edith had discussed their relationship with her family made Edith feel less vulnerable and less

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<sup>45</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 9 July 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>46</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, n.d. September 1925, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>47</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, New York, n.d. July 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>48</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 10 July 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

“compromised,” as her devotion to Frieda was now out in the open. These passages additionally indicated that knowledge of their relationship by family members reinforced the existence of their devoted relationship. The material presence of the letters in the family fold was symbolic evidence of their desires.

The letters were material symbols of the women’s erotic connections to each other. One example of this is the fact that the women often placed their letters close to their bodies. As material representations of their intimate desires, the letters’ locations indicated the women’s attitudes towards their intimacies. Both women saved their most recent letters under their pillows. Frieda, ever conscious of her mother’s opinion, additionally kept letters from Edith hidden in her laboratory coat pockets, under her pillow, or tucked away in her travel bags. Edith, more outwardly sensual than Frieda, slipped letters from Frieda down her frock or tucked them in her stockings. For example, in one letter Edith wrote:

I don’t think you can disgrace me any more than I’ve disgraced us already. I’ve had letters of yours found in all sorts of compromising places, but I’ve had to stop carrying them inside my clothes – they’ve worked up too often of late and shown above my evening frocks.

Edith put Frieda’s letters in her dress. Already charged with a material erotic presence, the letters could physically stand in for the body of the other.

In a November 1926 letter, Edith wrote that while aboard ship she slipped one of Frieda’s letters down the front of her dress. Frieda, in the person of the letter, was literally and figuratively very close to Edith. But the letter was as much a distraction as was Frieda’s bodily presence. Having the letter move about with Edith inside her dress was a sexually humorous reassurance of their intimate connection. Edith wrote:



It may amuse you to know that you put me off bridge last night by a letter as effectively as you have ever done when you were there in person. I was just dashing out to dinner when it came and I had no time to read it. We began to play bridge immediately after dinner and I had it stuck down the front of my frock. Every time I wiggled and it stuck into me, I lost all idea of the game.<sup>49</sup>

Is a letter just a letter? In this passage, characteristically ambiguous, Edith was penetrated by Frieda's letter.

Symbolism on the written page was also a material indication of Edith and Frieda's erotic connection. The written page offered them the opportunity to deliberately tease the recipient's affections by withholding intimate romantic suggestions. For example, in one late November letter Edith wrote to Frieda from Toronto before visiting with her for a few days in New York:

You know I keep thinking of all sorts of the most absurd affectionate things I want to say to you and I have to be awfully careful to keep them out of my letters. I won't be able to stop when I see you so you'd better prepare for a perfect deluge at idiocy.<sup>50</sup>

By purposely leaving ideas out of her letters, Edith summarily encouraged Frieda to think of the "absurd affectionate things" that Edith might say in person.

In addition to inspiring the erotic imagination, Edith and Frieda employed other literary devices such as asterisks, stars, and double entendres that indicated and heightened their desires. While more reasons for their employment are discussed later in this chapter, it is important to note the material significance of asterisks and stars on the written page. They were kisses. In one letter, Edith wrote in anticipation of seeing Frieda:

I haven't time to make stars but the whole of the page might be covered with them. I'm took rather badly whenever I think of seeing you. Isn't it dreadful that the thought of seeing each other should have such effect.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 21 November 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>50</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, n.d. September 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>51</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 June 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

Kisses were commonly employed symbolically throughout their correspondence. For example, one letter declared, “My Darling, this letter might be one large star for all I have to say.”<sup>52</sup> Another from Edith stated, “The rest of this page might be filled in well with asterisks - large fat emphatic ones!”<sup>53</sup> Large and small, their kisses were on the page.

Edith’s and Frieda’s use of repetition, immediacy, and erotic symbolism in their correspondence contributed significantly to the enhancement and production of their same-sex sexual desires. Without naming themselves as lesbian, the women described themselves as erotically connected and employed these material representations in a way that enhanced the written development of their understanding of their desires as erotically charged.

These material representations enhanced their desires, as they developed from “like” to “love.” Once the women came to terms with their desires for each other, they were able to talk about how they wanted to express their feelings. They wrote about how their devotion connected to their bodies. Their descriptions included the desire to kiss each other, to sleep together and to live together. All of these desires became manifest upon their physical reunion in September 1926. Edith and Frieda arrived at a definition of what a devoted relationship meant for them without the use of the word “lesbian.” Indeed the development in their self-understanding was so pronounced that Edith dared to recognize the new people they had become, writing, “I love you so terribly that it doesn’t seem as if it could be you and I at all but some perfectly different creatures--oh, I’m glad it isn’t though!”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, n.d. March 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>53</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 24 July 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>54</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 1 July 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

### Seeing Each Other in Other Female Couples

From the onset of their correspondence Edith and Frieda made connections between their desire for each other and the desire they perceived between other devoted female couples. Making connections with other devoted women was critical to Edith's and Frieda's sense of their relationship and their sense of who they were as a same-sex intimate couple vis-à-vis the world. Hearing and writing about the life stories of other same-sex couples not only affirmed their desire for each other, but also provided them with examples of the directions that their lives could take. Moreover, other female couples were mirrors against which they could compare their own relationship. The act of writing and talking about other women's same-sex desires was itself desire-producing. Indeed, in relating narratives of other same-sex couples, Edith and Frieda re-confirmed and re-described their own intimacies again and again.

The first example of this type of discussion appeared in a July 1925 letter written when Edith and her sister Bess traveled to England to visit aging relatives and explore employment opportunities for Edith. This letter was used earlier in this chapter to highlight Frieda's and Edith's first reference to "devoted" women. While aboard the Cunard liner Ascania en route to England, Edith wrote to Frieda regarding her encounter with two nurses from Toronto:

Bess picked up the nicest women from the hospital on board – two nurses, Miss Brown and Miss Scadding. They are head nurses at T.G.H. and quite old - about 45! They are very devoted to each other which is enough to make me interested in them even if they are such perfect lambs. I was quite thrilled when they said that they had known each other for years and had always planned this trip and had only managed it this year, and you could tell by the way they looked at each other, just how thrilled they were. Do you know them by any chance?<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 July 1925, File 3, Box 010, FFPR.

Miss Scadding and Miss Brown represented the successful establishment of a long-term intimate partnership between two women. The encounter with two medical women who were devoted to each other and who had lived together for a long time was no doubt an inspiration for the budding life-long relationship of Frieda and Edith. Edith wrote:

Miss Brown and Miss Scadding are as nice as ever - they were telling me today that their families had been awfully against their living together so much when they were young but after 20 years they are beginning to get used to it. It is an awfully difficult subject to chat about and would never be approached if I had to do it, but they suddenly began to talk about it today. They seem to agree with all we think about it, and also that there is no use trying to convince any other people about it - they simply can't see it.<sup>56</sup>

This part of the letter is of special interest for a number of reasons. The first is that Edith identified two middle-class women from turn-of-the-century Toronto as a same-sex devoted couple who thought about “it” in the same way that Edith and Frieda did. These TGH nurses were not unlike other nurses of the early 20th century in that they had been living together. However, Miss Scadding and Miss Brown told Edith that they had been living together for 20 years.

The possibilities of “devoted” partnerships among nurses is borne out in Canadian nursing history. Historian Kathryn McPherson makes the argument that the nursing occupational structure fostered women’s friendships, some of which evolved into permanent companionate relationship and erotic relationships.<sup>57</sup> Edith’s encounter provides a glimpse of Toronto women who lived together as an intimate couple. Of course many women lived together, but Edith’s reluctance to talk about “it” indicated that she meant more than mere cohabitation. She suggested that the relationship was an intimate one.

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<sup>56</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 July 1925, File 3, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>57</sup> Kathryn McPherson, *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-1990* (Toronto: Oxford University Press), 185.

The conversation on the Ascania's deck also reflected a generational difference. The older women, senior by 20 years, were freer to discuss same-sex intimate relationships while Edith, by her own admission an extrovert, was reluctant to broach the subject of women living together as partners and referred to same-sex relations as "it." The different generational perspectives likely reflected changes in social attitudes about women's same-sex sexuality over the previous two decades. Miss Scadding and Miss Brown started living together approximately in 1900 when same-sex intimate relationships were less pathologized. The idea of romantic friendships carried over from the last century into the next.<sup>58</sup> Women living together did not yet represent a social threat and thus they were able to live more invisibly than their male counterparts. Indeed, while male homosexuality had been a capital offence for decades, legal proscriptions regarding women's same-sex proclivities had been only suggested in Britain in 1921 and then the proposal was quickly tabled for fear that the publicity might disseminate too much information regarding women's sexuality.<sup>59</sup> For Miss Scadding and Miss Brown, the real crux of their families' objections likely rested not on sexual morality, but on the practical economic survival of their daughters.

Edith was reluctant to discuss her situation, yet here, before her eyes, were two nurses who were living proof of a long-term happy and intimate relationship between two women. That these women were medical women bolstered the possibility of a deeper relationship between Edith and Frieda. Frieda answered Edith from Toronto:

I think I have seen Miss Brown if she was head operating room nurse for a time but I can't picture her precisely. Please tell me more. It is a most extraordinary arrangement this system of partnership I suppose it shows that[sic] adaptability of

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<sup>58</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1 no. 1 (1975), 1-29.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Maynard, "Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subculture, Police Surveillance, and The Dialectics of Discovery, Toronto," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (1994), 208.

the human organism. I didn't realize till lately, how much I need you and depend on you and still, or rather because of it I rely much more on myself without you.<sup>60</sup>

Frieda's comment about the "adaptability about the human organism" reflected a quasi-biological approach to understanding women's same-sex intimate partnerships. She responded to Edith's remarks about the two nurses as would a biologist observing the human organism from the outside. Women opting for other women as life partners, for Frieda, signaled an evolutionary change that scientifically validated Frieda's desires. But she quickly moved from this scientific observation to a comment about how much she needed and depended on Edith. The encounter with this long-term partnership helped Frieda envision the possibility of her own partnership with Edith.

Indeed, Miss Scadding and Miss Brown made a great impression upon Edith and Frieda. Six months later, in a December letter, Frieda made an oblique reference to what Miss Scadding and Miss Brown represented. Upon visiting family friend Helen Bryant, she wrote, "As I am to share Helen's ample bed I hope I don't get absent minded while asleep—It might be a 'How did you get here Miss Brown?'"<sup>61</sup> Here Frieda obliquely suggested that she could imagine that Edith was with her in bed and worried about mistaking Helen for Edith.

Frieda and Edith encountered other female same-sex couples who were not as fortunate as Miss Scadding and Miss Brown. These encounters taught Edith and Frieda that they could have a future as a same sex couple, but there were risks. Indeed, the risk of rupturing their relationship with their natal families was not far from Edith's personal experience. A month after Edith left Toronto Edith wrote that she had met devoted women who were compelled to leave their families in order to live together:

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<sup>60</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 17 July 1925, File 6, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>61</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 12 December 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

My Lamb,

Just before I left Aunt F.'s, she told me that her cook and housemaid –who are by way of being ladies - had never had jobs before, but that their families had been rather disagreeable about their being awfully devoted and so they up and left and this was the only thing they could do. However, they loved it, as it meant living together. So there reasons to be a fair amount of it about. And they were certainly the happiest looking creatures. I simply tried to talk to them about it.<sup>62</sup>

Edith noted that the cook and the housemaid had been “ladies,” and had not previously worked for a living. In order to be together, they had sacrificed their social positions and took on paid work.

Edith's efforts to speak with the cook and the housemaid evidenced her great interest in devoted relationships between women. Her observation that they were the “happiest looking creatures” was a sign of success, even at the cost of family division. Their status as servants, however, highlighted the fact that some women, in order to be with the women they loved, were forced to leave their families and lose their privileged class status.<sup>63</sup>

Why did Edith's aunt Flinda tell Edith about her cook and housemaid? Perhaps Flinda intended this as a cautionary tale. Had the women not been “ladies” and had they not suffered a loss of social status Flinda might not have told Edith about her cook and housemaid at all. Though this remained unsaid, it might have seemed to Flinda that the sacrifice of one's family ties and social status would be enough to deter Edith from pursuing her devoted relationship with Frieda. Edith wrote to Frieda regarding her aunt's reluctance to employ the couple:

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<sup>62</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 August 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>63</sup> Edith did not provide the names of the cook and housemaid. Whether Edith's omission was intended to protect the women from their families or a sign of less regard for women same-sex couples who were “cooks” and “housemaids” is difficult to ascertain; the glaring fact remains that these two women remained nameless in a correspondence replete with the names of those with whom Edith and Frieda were interested. 55 Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 August 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

Aunt F. didn't like it much, but at the time she was ill and couldn't get anyone else who could get on with the nurse and her companion, but she seems to be quite satisfied now.<sup>64</sup>

Pressured by circumstance, Flinda had to relent and hire the two women. Edith noted that despite their personal situations, the cook and housemaid proved agreeable to Flinda's household. Interestingly, Flinda also lived with a woman companion. According to Edith, "Aunt F. couldn't get anyone else who could get on with the nurse and her [Aunt Flinda's] companion." Flinda thus set her own relationship apart from that of the cook and the housemaid. An outside observer would have seen two female couples living together, Flinda and her companion and the cook and the housemaid. The class differences between the two couples, however, were palpable.

Edith wrote about another "devoted couple" while traveling around Europe in November 1925, before going to work in London. Edith arrived in Antwerp to stay a few nights with family friend Helen [Bryant], who was sharing her living space with a devoted couple. Edith wrote:

She [Helen] was telling me about Esther and Lucie and how devoted they are, which even Helen couldn't miss. And they seem to have it out rather well. They are awfully happy together and seem to consider it a permanent arrangement – at least, Lucie does I am sure.<sup>65</sup>

As was the case with the cook and the housemaid, Edith highlighted the women's happiness and the potential longevity of their relationship.

One month later, Edith began employment as a clerk in the Ontario Government Office in London, a position she would hold for the next two years. Edith moved into a flat in London with family friend Mollie Calder. Mollie, as it turned out, was also a

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<sup>65</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 November 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.



“devoted woman.” Having found someone with whom she could share her experiences, Edith wrote,

We walked home (from the theatre) and Mollie began to tell me about Edith Clarke, to whom she is devoted. She had never said much about her before, and that little very casually, but I had gathered that she had rather liked her. However last night she embarked on the whole tale - their families don't like it and Edith[Clarke] wants to come to London to be with Moll, so there is a devil of a row going on. Edith and M. lived together here for a bit before there was any opposition, but E. was ill and had to go back to Jamaica, and since then, both their families have got irate.<sup>66</sup>

Were the natal families upset because the relationship was between two women or that Edith Clarke, hailing from Jamaica, which was a predominantly non-white country, might not be white? Edith Clarke was white, however.<sup>67</sup> The correspondence suggests that a shared sense of themselves as “devoted women” was the basis of the bond between Edith Williams and Mollie Calder. Edith's letters reflected her desire to compare her relationship with Frieda to that of Molly Calder and Edith Clarke. If Edith Clarke had been a woman of colour, Edith Williams likely would have referenced race as a differentiating factor; indeed, Edith might have expressed racism herself. Racism was ingrained in the culture, and in one letter to Frieda, Edith referred to the servants in Molly Calder's home as “Moll's niggers.”

Edith Clarke and Mollie Calder were at odds with their families because of their same-sex intimate relationship and not because that relationship was also interracial.

Edith wrote:

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<sup>66</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 December 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>67</sup> Edith Clarke, (1896-1979) daughter of Hugh Clarke, Custos of the parish, later returned to Jamaica to become an anthropologist and author of My Mother Who Fathered Me: A Study of the Family in Three Selected Communities in Jamaica (Allen and Unwin, London, 1957). Her papers are held in the British Library of Political and Economic Science. Reference Code: GB 0097 Clarke.

Anyway Mollie's Edith is coming in April having cast her family off, so we'll move them anyway as there is not enough room for her where we are.<sup>68</sup>

Edith Clarke had cut her family ties and returned to Mollie in England.

Almost a year later, Edith Williams's excitement about the Calder/Clarke couple had changed into concern for their relationship:

They chat about things a bit but it takes them a long time to get round to it because Moll is a sulky sort of devil. If she is annoyed she shuts up and won't make any remarks that are not absolutely necessary. When she at least gets to the point of talking, Edith is rude and furious. After a few days more they start to have it out and both get very sorry. They fall on each other's necks, think it is all right and fight about the same thing the next day.<sup>69</sup>

Edith viewed this relationship as difficult. She witnessed many arguments between the two women. As the Clarke/Calder partnership crumbled, Edith highlighted how her relationship with Frieda differed from theirs. Indeed, Edith's described her relationship with Frieda as superior to the relationships of *all* women in same-sex partnerships. Edith wrote:

Lambie, I'm beginning to think that we're much better off than All those other people who seem to be trying our arrangement.<sup>70</sup>

Edith emphasized the difference in her use of the "seem." Edith implied that while other women might *seem* to be trying to live as devoted women, Edith and Frieda were actually doing so, and they were "better off."

Frieda agreed and speculated that Edith Clarke and Mollie Calder's problems might be remedied by better communication skills. Frieda, in Philadelphia, wrote:

Lamb, What bad luck for Molly and Edith Clarke to find how they don't like each other's ways. I suppose they knew before but its mangy even so. From what you say I gather that they haven't discussed it which seems too bad. Bud, if I

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<sup>68</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 December 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>69</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 November 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>70</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 November 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

disappoint you or irritate you you'll tell me --Nothing hurts so much as not knowing what is the matter.<sup>71</sup>

Edith replied:

We should thank God in every way that we have the same way of doing things and the same kind of upbringing pretty much. Molly and Edith are having the most appalling time about it and it is all so pathetic. Lord I am sorry for them! They are perfectly devoted but living like this together hasn't been a success and they are both so unhappy about it.<sup>72</sup>

In this passage, Edith suggested that having a similar upbringing had a great deal to do with the success of her relationship with Frieda. As Mollie Calder and Edith Clarke's relationship disintegrated, Edith looked for reasons that it was failing. In addition to laying some of the blame on bad luck, Edith suggested that Mollie and Edith Clarke had brought this upon themselves in the way they loved each other. Edith wrote:

Dear - About Edith and Moll - they've really had awfully bad luck. They seem to have struck some of the mangy bits and not so many of the nice ones. They aren't nearly as good friends as we are and they like each other in a very selfish way. I'm so thankful that you're unselfish enough to let me go on being a pig most of the time.<sup>73</sup>

Edith's comment indicated that she and Frieda were not selfish in their love and that Frieda allowed Edith "to go on being a pig." The implication, perhaps, was that Edith could be difficult and Frieda tolerated those difficulties. But Edith also suggested that the foundation of their strong relationship was that they were "good friends."

Edith and Frieda's pride in their success as a happy couple was evident in Frieda's response to Edith's portrayal of Mollie's and Edith Clarke's unhappiness:

What you say about Molly and Edith is terribly sad. They could have such a nice time for so very little if they only knew how. Wouldn't it be fun to give them an example in our honourable selves?<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 10 October 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>72</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 10 October 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>73</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 November 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>74</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d.1926, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

This suggests that Edith and Frieda believed themselves to be well-versed in managing their “honourable” same-sex intimate relationship. Against the background of Mollie and Edith Clarke’s relationship emerged a blueprint of Edith and Frieda’s. Edith and Frieda could not live together, but they were hopeful about the future and planned carefully. They had similar upbringings, knew each other’s “ways” very well, and were therefore more compatible and communicative. They saw each other as generous and unselfish toward their devoted partner and on this basis offered themselves as an example of a successful same-sex couple.

Edith’s close relationship with Mollie Calder also offers insight into the physical connections between Edith and Frieda. They often imagined each other’s presence when they went to sleep. In one letter written in 1926, Edith wrote that she had dreamily fantasized that Frieda was lulling her to sleep. In the early hours of the next morning, Moll had come in to wake her. Edith, in her sleepy state, mistook Mollie for Frieda and kissed her. Edith described her kisses and embraces as violent, signaling the intensity of her physical relationship with Frieda. Edith wrote in February 1926:

You do look after me well, especially about putting me to sleep that last two nights. I absolutely disgraced you on Sunday, or rather Monday at 3am. Moll came back from Paris and wakened me rather gently- I had asked her to – and I embraced her and kissed her much more violently than usual. Oh lambie, it was an awful effort not to weep and to be sufficiently interested in her doings when I woke up properly<sup>75</sup>

This passage indicates some details regarding Edith’s and Frieda’s physical relationship or, at the very least, Edith’s dreams of her physical relationship with Frieda. Edith had imagined Frieda as “looking after her well,” as she went to sleep, suggesting that Edith

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<sup>75</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 February 1926, File 09, Box 010, FFPR. This passage could be interpreted as Edith’s admission of an indiscretion. I read this passage earnestly, however, given the context of the entire correspondence.

fantasized that Frieda was either caressing or lulling her to her slumbers. Edith imagined Frieda to be with her as she slept.

Moreover, Edith noted that she had disgraced Frieda with her violent kisses and embraces, suggesting that Edith might have revealed too much to Mollie regarding her physicality with Frieda. Nevertheless the effect of having dreamily imagined herself as kissing and embracing Frieda ended abruptly in Edith's sudden surprise and disappointment that she was kissing Mollie. Edith wrote, "Oh lambie, it was an awful effort not to weep and to be sufficiently interested in her doings when I woke up properly." Edith held back her tears, feigned interest in the goings on in Paris, while realizing that Frieda was not with her.

The passage is erotic in that it conveys an image of kissing women and blurred boundaries contained in Edith's sleepy passion. Was Edith writing about a flirtation with Mollie while also writing that in her sleep she desired Frieda? Was Edith simultaneously confessing and covering up an indiscretion? But Frieda's lack of jealous response to this scene suggests that Frieda never questioned Edith's relationship with her friend Mollie.

More light is shed on Frieda's and Edith's physical intimacies in another letter written shortly after Edith's rendezvous with Frieda at Go-Home:

Mollie and I have lived in a continued state of giggles all evening – she is a tool but so nice. I told her about our necks at Go-Home and our party of two weeks ago today on the island in front of Alada Starrs.[a lot of stars] <sup>76</sup>

Here Edith told Mollie that she and Frieda had been necking. Edith also mentioned that she and Frieda had had a "party on the island in front of Alada Starrs," meaning that she

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<sup>76</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, en route to London, 4 October 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

and Frieda had enjoyed more intimate sexual contact.<sup>77</sup> These personal romantic details demonstrate that with Mollie, Edith affirmed and marked those experiences as significant.

It was important for Edith, and consequently for Frieda, to be recognized as devoted women by other devoted women. This feeling of recognition was signaled by Edith's expression of happiness, "her continuous state of giggles" with her like-minded friend, Mollie. Edith told Mollie everything about her and Frieda and the two women together enjoyed the telling. In this way, each woman identified with each other's experiences while recognizing each other as devoted women. In this way, Edith acknowledged, validated, and attributed meaning to the same-sex passion that she and Frieda shared. And Edith, importantly, shared her accounts of recognition with Frieda.

Frieda also wrote about her encounters with other devoted women. In one letter for example, she wrote about having dinner with another devoted woman who worked at her hospital:

Miss Lawter had dinner with me today. I am simply bursting to an R whether her partnership with Miss Cook is disapproved of – If I were you I would know all about it by now.<sup>78</sup>

Frieda indicated that Miss Lawter was in a partnership with another woman and that she was very curious about the acceptance of this woman's relationship. She described the state of her curiosity as "bursting," or medically "rupturous," (which she wrote as "R"). Unfortunately Frieda did not ask her own question.

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<sup>77</sup> The phrase "on a party" could possibly refer to sexual intimacy. "On a party" was a euphemism for having sex according to historian Leila Rupp's analysis of diaries written in the 1930s by heterosexual American women. (Personal communication, 2004.)

<sup>78</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 March 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

Frieda desired recognition as well, but her reluctance speaks to both to her introverted nature and her sensitivity about discussing same-sex relationships. Thus she expressed some regret at not being able to know more about Miss Lawter and consequently not having Miss Lawter know more about her. In one way, Frieda recognized and was recognized by this other woman, but not as deeply, as was the case in the example provided by Edith of her exchange with Mollie. Frieda's correspondence suggests that though she desired deeper exchanges with devoted women, she was unable to facilitate them. Nevertheless she connected herself to Edith's meaningful exchanges with other devoted couples, noting that "if she were Edith, she would know all about it by now."

Recognition as a "devoted partnership" by other devoted couples was as important as seeing other women's devoted partnerships. Edith's and Frieda's sense of themselves in an intimate same-sex partnership was affirmed by the presence of other female couples and other devoted women's perceptions of their relationship. To be recognized and related to publicly as a same-sex couple was critical to the development of their sexual identity in that they were not alone. Having their desire recognized by other female couples helped Edith and Frieda locate their partnership within their social milieu. Thus they could imagine themselves as members of a developing community of devoted women.

Each telling of the desires and relationships of other couples was a re-telling, an affirmation of their own story of their relationship. Writing about the same-sex desires of other women created possibilities for Edith's and Frieda's relationship. The nurses aboard ship demonstrated the potential for a long-term, successful, and devoted relationship. The

example of the cook and the housemaid cautioned that repercussions might occur but their example assured Edith and Frieda of happiness in their choices. The example of Mollie and Edith Clarke raised the likelihood that some familial ties might be sacrificed and also signaled that despite great effort, the partnership could fail. Lucie and Esther in Antwerp offered a brief portrait of a successful devoted relationship built on politics, but far removed from natal families. Frieda's brief reference to Miss Lawter and Miss Cook was an acknowledgement of devoted women's desires within their own professional sphere.

Edith and Frieda used their knowledge of other female same-sex couples and employed erotic imagery from other women's relationships to bolster their own. From this, Edith and Frieda developed a sense of the distinct nature of their devotions to each other. Edith wrote a year after meeting Miss Scadding and Miss Brown:

I haven't the faintest ideas of what will be the result of all the fuss about us. It can't be any worse than it has been can it? Perhaps in time – 20 years or so – people will get tired of it and leave us in peace. That is the most we can hope for. I don't suppose they'll be enthusiastic about us even in 100 years. However, it hasn't made any difference really –My lamb, aren't you proud of us? <sup>79</sup>

Sounding resigned to struggle but proud and triumphant, Edith declared her hopes for the future. Edith's reference to "us" emerged from the devoted relationship that had developed between the two women but also can be interpreted to extend to a community of same-sex devoted couples. I suggest that Edith's reference to "us" was both unique and collective. Edith thought of her relationship with Frieda as unique, and yet it was not quite alone. Edith continued:

We had to exercise tact and discretion but it hasn't made any difference to our being devoted to each other really, has it? It is such a delightfully secure feeling to think that various people have been awfully down on it and done their best to

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<sup>79</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 June 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.



spoil it – and they were the ones who could bring more pressure to bear than anyone else – and yet it is still there more than ever.<sup>80</sup>

In this significant passage, Edith stated unambiguously that those who objected to their devotions were the same people who held the most influence in their lives—their families. And not only did their families object; their families did their best to derail their developing partnership. Their families, Edith emphasized, brought down more pressure than anyone else.

Edith also highlighted their use of tact and discretion as a method of protecting their relationship from their family members. She noted that this might also have had a deleterious effect on the development of their passions. But Edith stated triumphantly that on the contrary, their devotion to each other was stronger than ever, which was a testament to the strength of their passion. There was more than the strength of their passion that countered the lack of recognition and active disruption by family members, however. Edith and Frieda's efforts to identify and connect with other devoted couples provided affirmation and validation where their families could not.

Making connections between their desires for each other and the desires they perceived between other devoted female couples was indeed critical to their sense of their relationship as a devoted couple vis a vis the world. Their connections with other devoted women affirmed their desires; other couples were mirrors of their own experiences. In seeing other couples, Edith and Frieda were able to see and name themselves as a devoted couple in the world. Additionally, the knowledge of other devoted relationships offered the two women positive possibilities for the future of their burgeoning relationship. In these examples, Edith and Frieda could hope for a long-term relationship such as the one

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<sup>80</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 June 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

enjoyed by Miss Scadding and Miss Brown, a relationship signaled by happiness, such as they witnessed between aunt Flinda's cook and housemaid, a relationship distinguished by political activism and travel in the example of Esther and Lucie, a relationship marked by passion and that encompassed different national backgrounds in the example of Mollie and Edith Clarke, and a relationship that seemed to be quietly located within Frieda's professional sphere, that of Miss Lawter and Miss Cook. These other couples provided mirrors for comparison while also allowing Frieda and Edith to choose how to proceed in developing their own relationship. In the examples of the cook and the housemaid, Edith learned that if they proceeded "with tact and discretion," they could maintain their relationship with their families and still have their relationship. From the example of Mollie Calder and Edith Clarke, Edith surmised that being good friends and sharing similar backgrounds were important contributions to the success of their devoted relationship.

Telling the stories of other devoted relationships was desire-producing. Discussing other devoted couples' sexualities and their own physical expressions of their sexuality was in itself erotic. Moreover, examples of other women's physical connections with each other and discussions of their own physical connections also confirmed the reality of the women's physical expression. What had happened in memory was now re-told, re-inscribed, and given meaning in their letters.

Edith and Frieda, by making connections with other devoted couples, not only recognized themselves as a devoted couple, but were recognized as a devoted couple by others who were devoted. This joint recognition of their shared realities allowed Edith and Frieda to locate their partnership within a social fabric that contained other devoted

couples. Their knowledge of other devoted couples and Edith and Frieda's self-descriptions as part of this burgeoning community was critical in helping them weather the storms of their families' disapproval. They were truly not alone.

### **Writing Resistance: Preservation of Letters and Preservation of Self**

This last section looks at how Edith and Frieda employed their correspondence as a site of resistance against external pressures that opposed their partnership. The women used their correspondence in ways that safeguarded and assured the development of their devoted relationship. Moreover, the correspondence was a place wherein the women strategized about how to present and preserve their devoted partnership, a key element of which was their use of discretion. Here I examine sexual desire and behaviour in relation to sexual identity and personal privacy. This section highlights the fact that Edith and Frieda prioritized the development and preservation of their devoted relationship and resisted threats to their relationship.

I suggest that resistance was employed in four ways: first in the women's actions of reading, writing, and saving their correspondence; second in the women's creation of a narrative as the form of their correspondence; third in the women's efforts to style their manner of writing in what they termed "fit for publication" and "sensible writing" as a tool that safeguarded their developing desire; and fourth in their use of the correspondence as a place wherein they strategized about with whom they could share and from whom they should withhold their self-description as devoted women.

How Frieda and Edith read their letters, how they wrote their letters, and how much time and energy they devoted to their correspondence can all be construed as methods of resistance. The act of writing the correspondence contradicted intense

cultural, economic, and social pressures upon women to *not* record their lives. Carolyn Heilbrun writes that the very effort of writing about one's life as a woman is an accomplishment for women.<sup>81</sup> Recording same-sex intimate devotions was even more challenging. For example, in one of the first letters written in the correspondence, Edith and Frieda took issue with the fact that letters from male suitors were culturally valued in ways that letters from other women were not. In a July 1925 letter that was written from aboard ship en route to London for the first time, Edith noted that her sister Bess read letters over and over from her male beau while she (Edith) just watched. Edith implied that Bess felt that she had the right to ignore Edith and read her letters while Edith felt that she could not do the same with Frieda's. Edith wrote:

At tea, I ate steadily while Bess read 6 letters from her lover,-and is now re-reading them before she goes to bed.<sup>82</sup>

In response, writing from New York, Frieda asked:

What exactly is the quite difference [sic] between Bess reading her letters several times over and us doing it?<sup>83</sup>

Frieda's comment called attention to a heteronormative standard that prioritized Bess's heterosexual love letters over Edith's same-sex love letters. Bess was comfortable to do her reading in public, while Edith and Frieda read their letters in private. Bess was content to ignore her tea companion, who "ate steadily," while prioritizing her male suitor. Heterosexual privilege was an unspoken theme between Bess and Edith that was addressed by Frieda's question. Nevertheless, Edith and Frieda prioritized their letters to each other, contravening social pressures to the contrary. Indeed, Edith and Frieda spent large amounts of their private time reading and re-reading their letters, writing letters, and

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<sup>81</sup> Heilbrun, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, letter fragment, October 1925, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>83</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 3 November 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

thinking about each other in between.

The women employed the letters in a cathartic way. They used them as a refuge from private miseries and from public frustrations that systematically opposed their hoped-for future. Frieda expressed her frustration with her family and the medical world. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the letters were vehicles for the expression of their feelings. And almost daily, they wrote about their desire. As Heilbrun notes, “women’s writing can carry the significance of resistance and potential revenge; and writing about the self can break down the wall between the personal and the public life of women.”<sup>84</sup> Edith’s and Frieda’s life-writing clearly demonstrated the impact of their developing desires upon all aspects of their lives. Thus in venting frustration and expressing desire, the women used the letters to resist negative discourses.

The fact that Edith and Frieda created a narrative out of their correspondence was a significant factor in strengthening their resistance and preserving their devoted relationship. Indeed, Frieda and Edith entwined their thoughts and desires into a romance where they described and developed their story of falling in love. The women’s narrative began with “liking” each other, moved on to “loving” each other and culminated in their physical connection. The correspondence was a blueprint for their future, written into a story of love’s discovery. The sense of sequence, of development, and of their own history of their sexuality offered a means by which Edith and Frieda affirmed their sexual identities as devoted women. In theorist Judith Roof’s terminology, their narrative is best described as the “narrative edifice of a life story” and their correspondence was a “structure against a chaotic world.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Heilbrun, 18.

<sup>85</sup> Roof, xxii.

The women described their same-sex relationship in a narrative that recalled the heterosexual world, even as it challenged it. Edith's and Frieda's adherence to the romantic narrative trope "naturalized" their same-sex devotion to each other in a familiar heteronormative form. There was the beginning, when Frieda and Edith met; a middle, when the women overcame challenges; and the imagined end in which they placed their hopes for the future. Their written account of the development of their sexuality offered the prospect that each was ensconced in the middle of a story.<sup>86</sup> The women look backed to their beginning and look forward to the future.

As a further measure of resistance, Edith and Frieda saved their letters. Their efforts to save their correspondence supported their letter-writing against larger cultural messages that downplayed same-sex relationships between women. Given that their relationship was not validated by their places of work, their families, or their closest friends, the correspondence was the means by which Edith and Frieda acknowledged their valued relationship in a private yet tangible way. The writing, collection, and saving of their letters was a material symbol of their relationship and their shared past. Indeed, the correspondence was precious enough for Edith to sort it and pack it away carefully on her two-week voyages across the Atlantic. In July 1926 on her way to visit Frieda, Edith wrote:

On the boat I sorted out a pile of letters I had packed away in a box- the practice remember, was from you and I was amazed at the number there were. We have kept the mails busy in the last year, my dear. with all my love B.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> I use the word "ensconced" to indicate the clarity of the linear structure of the narrative conceived by Edith and Frieda. From this imagined structural position one is positioned to see both the past and the future.

<sup>87</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 7 July 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

Edith noted that a large and ever increasing collection of letters was at once a boon and a burden. Indeed, what to do with correspondence was broached by each of the women from time to time. By spring 1927, the women had amassed an imposing collection. Edith wrote from England:

You know my lamb since you've been living there [Philadelphia] your letters are always on the same paper - so convenient for having bound – But seriously I'll think I'll have to do something about it soon - they take up so much space.<sup>88</sup>

In this passage, Edith considered having the letters bound, indicating that she was thinking of their permanent preservation. Frieda responded to the letter crisis:

You speak the truth about the letter-housing problem. It is becoming acute. This collection mania is queer. I can't say I was much given to it until the last two years - even with my purple past.<sup>89</sup>

Frieda confirmed that they had been saving their letters for the past two years, despite what she termed her “purple past.” Significantly, Frieda did not describe herself or her relationship as queer, but she felt comfortable using this word to describe her “mania” for collecting letters.

The women's resistance extended to the manner in which they wrote their letters. Edith and Frieda often wrote about styling their writing in a manner that was “fit for publication” and “sensible.” They felt that their correspondence would be better preserved and even published if they disguised their passions. The possibility of publication was discussed early on in the correspondence. In a December 1925 letter Edith wrote, “The letter I had from you yesterday is quite unique, I think. It is fit for publication about as it is, which is more than could be said of most of our letters.” In the same passage Edith explained what she meant by being fit for publication:

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<sup>88</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 April 1927, File 08, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>89</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d, May 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR. Note the double meaning of the word queer accompanied by Frieda's use of 'purple' in describing her life.

And yet it is extremely personal and gives me the impression of having been most affectionate and yet there is nothing you can put your finger on and say “This is the affectionate touch. How do you do it?”<sup>90</sup>

Frieda agreed:

Your remarks about the letters are rather bright – I think the finishing touch was to give the lie to half your remark by making it ‘fit for publication’ and yet extremely intimate.<sup>91</sup>

This exchange suggests that the two women believed that if they did not openly discuss their same-sex intimate love for each other and only hinted at the idea of their affections, then perhaps their correspondence could be preserved through its publication. And if they could preserve their relationship in this way, then the two women could resist negative cultures discourses that negated the stories of devoted women.

Additionally, by disguising their passions, the women resisted the potential destruction of their letters. Someone (perhaps a member of one their families) who was prone to destroying letters that discussed same-sex passion might think twice about destroying letters that were not overtly passionate. Their “sensible” manner of writing downplayed the intensity of their feelings. Moreover, this “sensible” manner employed phrases and symbols of affection that could be interpreted in multiple ways. Some examples of this method of resistance are found in Edith’s and Frieda’s use of phrases with multiple meanings—these phrases could have both sexual and non-sexual meaning. A few, for example, were “on a party” which was a euphemism for having sex, “taking pleasures strangely,” “purple,” “odd women,” and “peculiar.” Asterisks, or what the women termed “stars,” stood in for kisses. Kisses, too, could be either romantic or friendly.

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<sup>90</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 December 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>91</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 21 December 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.



But as much as Edith and Frieda intended to write “sensibly,” they also acknowledged that they sometimes did not do so. In a spring letter in 1927, Edith commented upon Frieda’s letters of the past two years, noting that most of her letters were written without restraint:

I was awfully amused to find a letter of yours of a year ago in a book the other day. I have evidently led you astray as it was almost sensible and was quite suitable for publication.<sup>92</sup>

Here Edith indicated that most of Frieda’s letters were not sensible at all, suggesting that Frieda’s letters over the past two years were indeed openly passionate. In her answer to this, Frieda agreed, but added that they had written so many letters that even their collection of restrained letters could make a complete correspondence. To this statement, Frieda added, “But this isn’t my day for writing sensible letters.” Indeed, Frieda preferred to write about how she felt.<sup>93</sup>

Thus the two women used their correspondence as a site of resistance to external pressures that opposed their partnership in the belief that doing so safeguarded and assured the development of their relationship. Their resistance included the act of reading, writing, and saving their correspondence, creating a narrative form of their relationship in their letters, styling their writing in a manner that conveyed their desires more discreetly, and using their correspondence as a place wherein they could strategize about with whom they could share and from whom they should withhold their self-description as devoted women.

Edith and Frieda resisted cultural pressures that opposed the recording of women’s devoted relationships by prioritizing their acts of reading and writing their

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<sup>92</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 28 March 1927, File, 08, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>93</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 7 April 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

letters. Edith and Frieda recorded their relationship in the form of a narrative that located their story in the heteronormative world and at the same time reflected and challenged traditional heteronormative perceptions of the romantic story. Edith's and Frieda's story began with discussions of how much they "liked" each other and moved quickly on to "love." The story of their love had a shared past and future that was important enough to be cherished and saved as a collection that was a tangible symbol of their devotions. Moreover, Edith's and Frieda's collection of letters was a significant symbol of their resistance, given that their relationship was not validated by family, friends, or places of work. The women's acts of writing the letters, creating a narrative, and cherishing and preserving the letters affirmed, historicized, and solidified their devoted relationship. How they strategized about their discretion is explored in the final section of this chapter.

### **Discretion, Protection, and Presentation: Strategies of Resistance**

Edith and Frieda used the correspondence as a vehicle in which they strategized their resistance against the negative cultural discourses that were encountered in their relationships with acquaintances, co-workers, friends and family members. Edith and Frieda nurtured and protected their desire by discussing how they conducted these relationships in their letters. Edith and Frieda compared their disclosures and strategized the different ways they presented themselves to other people. To this end, the correspondence suggests that Edith and Frieda employed three strategic methods of discretionary self-presentation. They protected their desires by judiciously sharing their sexual identity as "devoted women" with those whom they believed to be supportive, withholding their identity from those who might not be fully supportive, and negotiating

their relationship with “those who knew and wish they didn’t.” In the words of Laura Doan, there were “the utterly unknowing, those who knew, and those who knew and wished they didn’t.”<sup>94</sup> In this way, the women used their correspondence to compare their self-presentations to acquaintances, co-workers, friends and family thus protecting their intimacies and resisting external pressures that opposed their budding relationship.

To acquaintances, Edith and Frieda often self-identified as single. To identify as a single woman could mean a woman who had not married yet, a widow, or a spinster, but none of these categories openly referenced women who partnered romantically with other women. Edith’s self-identification as a spinster is suggested in the following passage where Edith and the conductress of the ocean liner established a shared identity against a larger backdrop of travelling single women:

The females on this ship are all awful and all seem to be going out to be married in Canada and being awfully coy about it. I wonder why the engaged and married are so damn superior to us spinsters. The Conductress who is the one woman fit to speak to on the boat also complains of this attitude. She says that if she had to be nice to any more such young women she is going to wear a wedding ring in self-defense. We’ve decided that it would almost be worth getting married to see what it is.<sup>95</sup>

Curiously, having never before referred to herself as a spinster, Edith concealed her devoted partnership from her new acquaintance and referred to herself as a spinster. While in some contexts devoted women might be referred to as spinsters, the possibility of same-sex devotion was not broached and the two women instead used a term with heteronormative connotations. By not openly disclosing her devoted relationship, Edith avoided any possible negativity that might have ensued during the week-long voyage. But the cost of her discretionary resistance was an outward denial of her sexual identity.

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<sup>94</sup> Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) xiii.

<sup>95</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 June 1926, File 4, Box 010, FFPR.

To co-workers and friends, Edith and Frieda often comported themselves as very close friends, but not openly as lovers, leaving ambiguous the nature of their relationship. For example, Frieda chose to remain discreet and ambiguous when one of her fellow interns surmised Frieda's non-heteronormative inclinations. In a July 1926 letter, Frieda suggested that a colleague was aware of her same-sex sexuality:

I've grown quite attached to Ralli. She seems to get some amusement out of me at least enough to ask me to do things with her husband and Isabel Simpson to whom she must be devoted judging by her manner – if I am any judge of that – it isn't merely for convenience that they play about together. You might add that to your list for awkward pauses.<sup>96</sup>

Frieda noted that her colleague Ralli "seemed to get some amusement out of me" and mentioned that Ralli was interested in having Frieda join Ralli's husband and her close friend Isabel. Ralli likely believed that Frieda would understand her devotion to Isabel because Frieda herself was in a devoted same-sex relationship. In turn, Frieda recognized Ralli's devotion to Isabel. This was evident in her comment, "that it wasn't merely for convenience that they play about." Here Frieda implied that Ralli and Isabel engaged in more than a friendship.

But this was all Frieda wrote. It is possible that, having remarked on the presence of Ralli's husband, Frieda did not identify with Ralli enough as a devoted woman to warrant her confidence. After this exchange, Frieda did not discuss Ralli's affairs further, even though she continued to mention Ralli several times in a professional capacity. Ultimately, Frieda chose not to share her devoted identity with Ralli.

Significantly, Frieda's reticence also might have been professionally derived. This is evident when another intern, Burnsey, expressed interest in Frieda's singular devotion:

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<sup>96</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 5 July 1926, File 09, FFPR.

I think Burnsey's remarking that I had a letter from you in every pocket started it. As a matter of fact it was the same letter getting shifted to relieve congestion every time I wanted something out of my pockets as was easily demonstrated (but I didn't say that I had two others in my suitcase.) She would seem to look on us with an overwhelming interest but not one you would want to give yourself away to – there is no telling how long it will last but just now I can see we are funny.<sup>97</sup>

In this passage, Frieda noted that her co-worker Burnsey was “overwhelmingly” interested in Frieda’s relationship with Edith and that Burnsey’s interest was sparked by the number of Edith’s letters in Frieda’s pockets. Despite Burnsey’s interest, Frieda wrote that she was “not one you would want to give yourself away to,” intimating that Burnsey’s interest was not the “right” kind of interest. Frieda implied that her interest was out of curiosity and not because of a shared experience of same-sex attraction. Thus Frieda protected her devotion to Edith, and perhaps her job, by her discretion. Frieda continued by remarking that just for a moment she could see how she and Edith might have appeared “funny” to others—that she and Edith were different. Thus Frieda affirmed her strategy of discretion with co-workers, protected her professional position, and avoided exposure and possible negative repercussions.

Edith and Frieda also discussed their discretion in relation to their friends and together attempted to counter the heteronormative discourse that were common in their social world. They often comported themselves as close friends, but not openly as lovers. For example, when prompted by interested girlfriend Helen Bryant, Edith chose to not divulge any details of her devotion to Frieda. Edith wrote from Antwerp in November 1925:

Helen was saying that it must be nice to have someone to whom it really mattered whether you were there or not. And I said that I thought it was, and the conversation languished somewhat. Then she said something about you and me – that we hit it off quite well, and I found that all I could do was agree. I simply

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<sup>97</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, June/July 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

couldn't say any more or talk about you at all, because she wouldn't understand and it seemed so indecent; although I had said quite a lot about you to the nice Miss Brown coming over on the boat. Isn't it awful? So I found myself saying, "Yes, but Frieda's such a lamb" and that ended it.<sup>98</sup>

In this conversation, Edith refrained from discussing her love for Frieda; she was only able to say that Frieda was "such a lamb," despite Helen's interest. Why did Edith hold back? Edith wrote that she chose not to speak openly, referring to Helen as either utterly unknowing or unable to understand the depth of feeling that she had for Frieda. Edith was not yet ready to discuss her same-sex devotion with another person who did not share her sentiments, noting in contrast that it was easy for her to talk about Frieda to other devoted women.

Edith and Frieda were afraid that if they were open about their sexual relationship and identity, that they would be ostracized. Indeed, their letters suggest that their popularity was on the wane as their relationship developed. In a March 1926 letter, the women discussed some of the reasons that they were not as popular as they would have liked. Frieda wrote:

Our not being popular is probably due to two things a) people feel left out b) it is against nature- a) we have done our best to rule out and there is no arguing over b).<sup>99</sup>

In her explanation, Frieda acknowledged that despite their efforts to include their friends, their friends' perceptions of their close relationship were affected by heteronormative discourse. Frieda and Edith felt that their friends' perceptions of their devotion caused their friends to feel left out. Frieda acknowledged that their closeness might indeed have left out their friends but she also suspected that many of their friends felt that their devotion to each other was against nature. This perception was supported by Edith's

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<sup>98</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 November 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>99</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 March 1926, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

discussion with her friend Gwyneth Godfrey regarding her relationship with Frieda. Edith wrote in a July letter:

Gwyn did tell me what she thought of you and I'll tell you when I see you—apart from being a friend of mine she likes you but her whole idea of you is disturbed by the peculiar idea she has of our friendship. You are leading me into all sorts of evil, and I am being stupid not to see it. I'm so sorry for her – isn't it a pity she is such an idiot about it?<sup>100</sup>

Gwyn's points were later elaborated:

I'm not telling you what Gwyn said about us because it will be so much easier to argue about it in person than by letter, but it is all based on the fact that it isn't natural for young women to be devoted to each other.<sup>101</sup>

Gwyneth Godfrey echoed Edith's Aunt Flinda, but also was consistent with the opinions of some members of Edith's and Frieda's peer group. For example, only a few months after Gwyneth's conversation, Edith and Frieda discussed their intentions to conceal their intimate relationship from their girlfriends. In anticipation of a camping trip in September 1926, Edith wrote:

Frieda dear, I'm afraid that I may disgrace you on this party with the kids. I know I won't be able to be quite sensible all the time and if I had a relapse at the wrong moment it would be dreadful.<sup>102</sup>

A week later Edith added:

Oh it is going to be such fun pretending to be awfully detached at Go-Home, and perhaps a little bored with you! You ought to get a lot of amusement out of watching me. I have begun to practice now – it needs an awful lot.<sup>103</sup>

This exchange is telling and quite poignant. Edith looked forward to seeing Frieda, yet at the same time she intended to suppress her affection for Frieda, even in a gathering of their female friends. Edith and Frieda felt that they could not be themselves in the

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<sup>100</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 7 July 1926, File 09, Box 010 FFPR.

<sup>101</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 July 1926, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>102</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 3 September 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>103</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 8 September 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

company of their friends for fear of exclusion and rejection. In this respect Frieda and Edith opted to present themselves as ambiguously close women within a larger group of single women.

Frieda's and Edith's need to be accepted within their social milieu affected the women's deliberations about their future. In August 1926, when Edith and Frieda were considering the possibilities of living together full time, Frieda wrote, "Living in Sin has always struck me as a very boring affair because no one else will play with you."<sup>104</sup> Edith continued the discussion:

About this business of living together, I suppose we'll come to it sooner or later. You know it would mean practically cutting ourselves off from heaps of the people we know. It makes me sick the way people behave about us but that is what we get for going off the beaten track. Another thing, if we decide to combine forces, it is not only us who are involved - if we made a mess of, it is much more than, "Those idiots Frieda and Bud, they always did have peculiar ideas." But I would love to try it.<sup>105</sup>

Frieda acknowledged her fear of the complete ostracism that cohabitation might generate:

About the prospect of living together - That is matters more than just for us whether or not it is a success. If it won't be, we mustn't do it, I think. The great difficulty is that people will more or less cut us - in spirit at least - which may make us peculiar. It would be better if we aren't odd in too many directions at once. Ultimately I think we shall do it, but it is a question of whether it should be yet.<sup>106</sup>

In these exchanges Edith and Frieda presumed that their cohabitation would result in ostracism from many of their friends, that "no one would play with them." But the women nevertheless allowed for the possibility of living together in the future. Frieda noted that they should not live together "right away" adding that they could be "odd" but not in "too many directions at once." Frieda implied here that their friends might not be

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<sup>104</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 6 August 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>105</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 9 August 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>106</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 11 August 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.



able to accept the full weight of their devotion. Additionally, the two women feared that should their relationship fail, they risked becoming forever ostracized, noting that they would still be “cut-in spirit at least.” There was no going back.

As a result of their deliberations, Frieda and Edith decided to withhold full knowledge of their devoted partnership from their friends and to postpone living together. Their decision to withhold from their friends was a method of resistance in that they protected their relationship from criticism and thus safeguarded the development of their relationship. Their judicious resistance, however, offered them only limited opportunities to be together. They postponed cohabitation and they could not fully be themselves with their friends. Their strategic discretion and disclosure, which were shared in their correspondence, were the methods by which Edith and Frieda resisted negative cultural discourses that they encountered in their relationships with acquaintances, co-workers, and friends. Their discretion was affirmed in the way that Edith and Frieda presented themselves. To acquaintances, the women presented themselves as single women. To co-workers, the women allowed their close relationship to remain ambiguous. To their friends, Edith and Frieda suppressed their devotion. The two women, remaining discreet, kept their friends and their social lives while protecting their devoted relationship. But preservation and protection came at some cost. This was especially true with their family members.

Edith and Frieda resisted negative cultural discourses regarding same-sex intimacy between women that they encountered in their relationships with their family members. Indeed the two women faced adversity from the onset of their correspondence. The members of Edith’s and Frieda’s family knew a great deal about the women’s

devotion and wished they didn't. Edith's family sent Edith to England to get her away from Frieda and urged Edith to stay there. Frieda's mother forbade Frieda from bringing Edith into the family home and from attempting to bring Edith and her [Mrs. Fraser] together.

In these contexts, the two women strategized about their familial relationships. One method was to encourage familial affection for the beloved which was not an easy task. If their families actually liked the "girlfriend," maybe there was a chance for acceptance.

Edith and Frieda attempted to create a positive space for their beloved and for their relationship within their families home. Yet each family's suspicion that the other family's daughter was the "one who led the other into it" presented to Frieda and Edith the impossible task of winning family affection for that "one." This first became evident in December 1925 when Edith sent Frieda a scarf that she had made. The gift was significant to Frieda because it represented a great deal of effort—it was hand-knitted by Edith, who rarely knitted, and it was attached to an earlier memory of the two women together. Edith wrote from England:

Ever since that horrid day when we went to look at a silk scarf for you, and came away without it - about a year ago now-I haven't been able to think about you and a scarf at all happily. It was all so disagreeable and it was jumping out at me at the wrong time, and I was always feeling like such a worm; so it seemed a bright idea to make you one and settle the question forever. I hope you won't mind my being so silly about it. It carries a great deal of love, dear.<sup>107</sup>

In this passage, Edith indicated the deep significance of her gift. Frieda's response to the scarf was not only how much she loved the gift, but that she wanted to sleep in it always:

Then at noon I actually took the silk thing out of its envelope—and almost fainted. Aren't you bright, Bud! How did you do it? Between ourselves I want

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<sup>107</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 December 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

most to wear it to sleep in. You won't construe that as an insult I hope because it isn't. Darling I love the scarf and shall wear it until you tell me to stop and then some.<sup>108</sup>

A week later the scarf emerged in Frieda's family home as a symbol of her relationship with Edith. Frieda wrote:

By the way, when I was at home I took careful sounding as to your status in the house. Mother doesn't seem to mind your being talked of now - she did a bit when she was here - rather likes it to a point. And I had a swell time letting everyone admire your nice scarf. Not an admirable trait in a young girl. After all they were very nice about it.<sup>109</sup>

Frieda suggested that she was hoping for her mother (and family) to have a good opinion of Edith. If Frieda's mother appreciated the scarf, by extension her mother might approve of Edith. Later letters from Edith indicated, however, that this strategy did not work.

Helene did not want to be in Edith's company.

As a result, Edith and Helene avoided each other. The state of their difficult relationship surfaced when Edith planned to visit Frieda in New York. Edith considered re-scheduling her ocean crossing to steer clear of Frieda's mother. Edith wrote in June 1926:

What rotten luck that Mrs. Fraser is coming back in July! It is an awful thought, but I feel that N.Y. is not big enough for both of us, so that if I couldn't put off my sailing or something it would hardly be worth going down there.<sup>110</sup>

Edith found herself in a difficult position. She wanted to visit Frieda but knew that she could not be in the company of Frieda's mother. A few days later, Edith described her sensitivity to the bond between Frieda and her mother. Edith did not want to worsen the position in which Frieda had found herself. She instead was willing to sacrifice her time with Frieda:

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<sup>108</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 21 December 1925, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>109</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 1 January 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>110</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 June 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

Darling, I wrote you a cross discontented letter on Saturday night about Mrs. Fraser being in N.Y. when I might be – I'm sending it to you so you'll see just how I'm taken sometimes, but it just doesn't mean anything much but being cross. I'd come down to see you if there wasn't a chance of having more than a couple of hours with you, and that in the company of Mrs. Fraser. And I don't think it would be as bad as that, would it?<sup>111</sup>

Edith, sensitive to Frieda's position, declared that she missed Frieda so much that she was willing to travel hundreds of miles for only a few hours with Frieda and even in the company of Frieda's mother. Edith managed to maintain her connection to Frieda while resisting any confrontation with Frieda's mother. Frieda attempted to garner family affection for Edith. When that did not work, Frieda continued to avoid confrontation by keeping her mother and Edith apart.

Edith, however, candidly confronted her family's disapproval of her devotions to Frieda. This was evidenced in the following passage, written one month later:

About settling the question of you with my family, it wasn't done in a way you could copy – I wasn't nice enough. The whole thing came up quite soon after I got back when I said I was going to see you, and they said that there was no point in my running down to New York to put myself in your way. So I said that I was fond of you and it wasn't entirely on your side, and that I didn't know why they made such a fuss, etc. Mother sidestepped a bit and I asked if my new ideas on the subject were correct and found that they were. I said that I wasn't going to cast you off so why couldn't she agree to it sensibly? She said that it was such an unusual relationship to which I agreed, that she had nothing against you personally, in fact rather liked you, and that she could never approve but that I would no longer be badgered about it.<sup>112</sup>

Edith noted that her manner of "settling" her devoted relationship with her family was different from how Frieda might have "settled" the question and suggested that Frieda was nicer. Edith was direct and was not deterred. Naming her mother's actions as "badgering," Edith refused her mother's requests to cast off Frieda while at the same time she agreed with her mother that their relationship was "unusual." When Edith's family

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<sup>111</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 18 June 1926, File 04, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>112</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 July 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

placed Edith in the role of a gullible young woman who had put herself in Frieda's way, Edith countered that she was an equal willing participant in her devotion to Frieda. Edith presented herself to her family as a woman in a devoted relationship with another woman.

Nevertheless, Edith's family did not relent in their efforts to dissuade their daughter. In July 1926, Edith suggested to Frieda that her family had reneged on their earlier promise to not bother her about her relationship with Frieda:

In spite of the family's or rather Mother's having promised not to badger me about you, they are trying a skunky trick. Various people have asked me to go and stay with them and I am being urged to "Now why don't you go and get out of town and the heat now?" I know perfectly well that they are doing it so I will be away a good bit, and then if I want to do anything with you later on, they'll say, "You've hardly been at home at all, I think you might stay here in peace for your last week."<sup>113</sup>

Edith's family was not as co-operative as Edith's mother had promised they would be. This letter indicated that many of Edith's family members opposed Edith's devotion to Frieda. Edith noted angrily that her family was attempting to trick her into not seeing Frieda by imposing on her limited holiday time. Rather than saying that they did not want her to visit Frieda, Edith's family attempted to forestall Edith by suggesting that she had more pressing family obligations. Edith refused her family's entreaties and visited Frieda in New York. Once again in her actions, Edith challenged her families' heteronormative pressures by prioritizing her same-sex devotion over her family's impositions.

The women's frustrations in their attempts to sustain their devoted relationship and maintain connections with their families were evident a week later. Frieda, rarely complaining, wrote, "I'm fed up with being careful about them. What I don't understand

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<sup>113</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 July 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

is how they don't mind what we do as long as they can pretend they don't know."<sup>114</sup>

Frieda noted that both families were aware of the significance of their devotions, but their families either minimized their daughters' relationship or feigned ignorance. After this, Frieda felt compelled to be more overt about her devoted identity and to be no longer so "careful" around her mother in discussing her relationship with Edith.

Six months later in a December letter Frieda related her efforts to convince her mother to not turn a blind eye to her sexual identity or her devoted relationship with Edith:

Your being away hasn't been of the slightest good to Mother, apparently. We exchanged a few words several days ago. The essence of it was in the end that "something or someone has come between us" and that she thinks is you. Whereupon I pointed out the condition existed long before I knew you. Which surprised her and made her quite miserable I'm afraid. In spite of what she says I think I must be quite fond of her because I can't be hurt by what any one else says a tenth as much.<sup>115</sup>

Frieda noted that Helene believed Edith to have come between them and that Frieda's preference for women was because of Edith. Frieda told her mother that "her condition" (presumably her homosexuality) preexisted her relationship with Edith. She then noted that her clarification surprised her mother and made her mother "miserable." Likely feeling rejected by this, Frieda indicated that she was hurt by her mother's reaction to her disclosure that her "condition" caused her to prefer women. Signaling her close relationship with her mother, Frieda wrote poignantly that no one else could make her feel so hurt, yet she remained "quite fond" of her.

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<sup>114</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 6 August 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>115</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 22 December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

The rift in Frieda's relationship with her mother relationship was evident a year later in an April 1927 letter from family friend Nettie Bryant.<sup>116</sup> Nettie was giving advice to Helene Fraser on what to do about her daughter's devoted relationship with Edith. And Helene's concerns were echoed in Nettie's answers. The letter clearly delineated Helene Fraser's disapproval of Edith's and Frieda's relationship. Nettie described Frieda's "marked preference for Bud" as a "sore problem," that was "eating your heart out."<sup>117</sup> She suggested that Helene maintain a connection with Frieda while at the same time limit Edith's access to Frieda. Nettie also advised Mrs. Fraser to forbid Edith from visiting the Fraser family home. In fact, the correspondence reveals that this course of action had already been taken by Helene. Edith was seldom discussed by Helene nor was Edith ever invited to the Fraser home.

Nettie additionally recommended that Helene should leverage Frieda's affections for her against Frieda's affection for Edith: "Frieda will never let Bud or anyone else crowd you out of that chamber of her affection and her fealty which has always been yours – her own and only mothers." Nettie's letter confirms Frieda's close bond with Helene. In fact, Nettie placed family ties over the ties between husband and wife and the marital relationship between husband and wife over the relationship between "girlfriends":

One cannot barter strong family ties even for a husband to whom one is rightly devoted, without a feeling of great loneliness in the world! How much so when it – is only for the cause of a girl-friend!<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> This letter was the only letter in Fraser/Williams correspondence that was not written by either Frieda or Edith, yet it was important enough for the two women to save as part of their collection.

<sup>117</sup> Nettie Bryant to Helene Fraser, 23 April 1927, File 06, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

Nettie and Helene apparently believed that the threat of losing the mother-daughter bond between Helene and Frieda was enough to convince Frieda to end her relationship with Edith. Frieda thus would have to live with Helene's disapproval, which was a difficult prospect for Frieda. Putting her close relationship at risk for only a "girl-friend" reflected the fact that she was willing to resist the immense weight of the heteronormative imperative. Frieda's efforts to retain her mother's approval signaled her mother's importance, and Frieda letter's indicated her reluctance to risk any fracture in their relationship. Yet Frieda risked her mother's disapproval.

In the context of North America in the 1920s, Frieda was not alone in risking her relationships with her mother. Similar assumptions regarding mothers' expectations of their daughters' filial affections were made between other mothers and their single daughters during this decade. Jean Barman's biography of Canadian born, New York columnist Constance Lindsay Skinner, for example, recalled the expected high yields of the mother-daughter bond that were foisted upon Canadian single women. As a burgeoning writer in New York, Constance was expected by her mother's family to return to Vancouver and care for her mother, as Skinner's aunt wrote her niece in early 1925:

Your mother needs you with her, not for a visit but permanently. She needs a daughter's love and daily attention and the attention in things a servant cannot undertake. It is your privilege to leave New York entirely until such time as your mother does not need you.<sup>119</sup>

The risks of not fulfilling these expectations were large. Skinner remained in New York, breaking all family ties and she never saw her mother again. Frieda and Edith, in contrast,

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<sup>119</sup> Jean Barman, *Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 149.



managed to maintain connections with their families, while at the same time they preserved their devoted relationship.

The women preserved and protected their devoted relationship, using their correspondence as a medium of resistance. In their correspondence Edith and Frieda shared the methods through which they attempted to resist the powerful pressures of heteronormative opposition that was applied by their family members. The women described and compared their actions in presenting, defending, and preserving their relationship and their sexual identities as devoted women. Edith wrote to Frieda about her forthrightness with her family and her refusal to be deterred, thereby affirming to Frieda her committed devotion. Frieda told Edith about her attempts to gain her family's affection for Edith. But at the same time she wrote that she found that she had to be careful and that she feared her mother's disapproval. When she found that her strategy was not working, Frieda risked her close relationship with her mother and affirmed her identity as a devoted woman in a relationship with Edith. In this way the two women preserved their relationship within the context of their families.

There were costs and compromises. Edith was not welcome in Frieda's family home and Frieda seldom mentioned Edith to her mother. Edith coordinated her visits with Frieda so as to not conflict with Mrs. Fraser's visits. The Williams family sent Edith to England away from Frieda, urged Edith to stay away, and made attempts to take up all of Edith's time while she was in Toronto. Edith remained undeterred and confronted her family. The two women used their correspondence to resist their families' pressures against their devoted relationship. They discussed the strategies that they employed in order to maintain connection with their families and preserve their relationship. Indeed,

they did sustain their family connections but with disheartening results. At the same time, however, Edith and Frieda protected their devoted relationship and affirmed their sexual identities as devoted women.

### **Conclusion**

As this chapter as demonstrated, Edith and Frieda created, defined and enhanced their desire in their correspondence. The meanings that Edith and Frieda applied to their feelings for each other were critical to their sense of identity in the world. Without mentioning the word “lesbian,” Edith and Frieda came to a description of themselves as “devoted women” and in their letters they came to a sense of what their devotion meant. In the course of finally acknowledging the nature of their relationship, starting with “like” and then gradually talking about “love,” they began to describe to each other what their love meant in a physical way. The resulting meaning of their passions was their establishment of a hoped-for, devoted, lifelong partnership that was attainable in the contexts of their lives and workable in their relationships with others. The foundation for this was laid in their correspondence.

Frieda and Edith created and enhanced their intimate desires in a number of ways. They created their desire in their letters to each other. The women described each other’s absence in their letters, and it was in this absence that their desire was produced. In addition, the regular appearance of their letters affirmed and maintained an emotional connection as well as a material one. In this way, Frieda and Edith conceptualized the material letters as bodily representations of the beloved other while introducing new erotic elements to their passions.

Frieda and Edith created and enhanced their desire in their connections with other like-minded same-sex women couples. Importantly, Frieda and Edith recognized themselves publicly as devoted women while at the same time were recognized by other devoted women in their lives. Moreover, writing the life stories of other same-sex women couples affirmed their desire for each other and provided examples of the directions that their lives could take in a same-sex intimate female partnership. Other devoted couples were mirrors against which they could compare their own relationship. Discussing other women's same-sex desires was itself desire-producing. Relating the narratives of other same-sex couples, while comparing their own stories, served to reiterate Edith's and Frieda's erotic intimacies again and again.

Edith and Frieda used their correspondence to bolster their felt desire against cultural discourses that did not recognize women's "devoted partnerships." Their correspondence was a place of catharsis for all of Edith's and Frieda's frustrations and a place in which they wrote about their desires. The correspondence became a narrative of romance, a material testimony to the story of their desire, a history of their personal recognition of their same-sex intimate sexuality. Additionally as a narrative, their letters located their story within dominant heteronormative discourses. Their written narrative contextualized, affirmed and solidified their passions to the point where the accumulation of letters was a material testimony to their relationship.

Edith and Frieda wrote their correspondence with its preservation in mind, often conscious of writing in a way that was "fit for publication." Having read published versions of other contemporary correspondences, they felt that there might be the possibility that theirs, too, would one day be published. Moreover, they were aware that

others might come across their correspondence and they hoped that by writing sensibly they might protect their letters from destruction. To write sensibly meant writing in a stylistic manner that did not overly betray the depth of their felt desire and that incorporated restrained language, double entendres, and asterisks. But as the women acknowledged in their correspondence, most of their letters were not sensible, but passionate.

Frieda and Edith employed their correspondence to resist heteronormative discourses in order to preserve and protect their burgeoning relationship as devoted women. In their letters they discussed their relationships with acquaintances, co-workers, friends, and family. Their discussions could be interpreted as discretionary strategies of self-presentation and self-preservation. Thus, in their networks of acquaintances, co-workers, friends, and family, to paraphrase Laura Doan, there were “those who knew” that Edith and Frieda were in a devoted partnership with each other, “the utterly unknowing,” and “those who knew and wished they didn’t.”<sup>120</sup> In this context, Edith and Frieda protected the intimacy of their relationship in the manner by which they disclosed their relationship and deliberated about their presentation of themselves as devoted women in their social circles.

To other devoted couples they presented themselves as a devoted partnership. To acquaintances, Edith and Frieda often identified as single women, and to co-workers and friends Edith and Frieda offered themselves as ambiguously close friends. In their families there were “those who knew and wished they didn’t.” Edith and Frieda struggled against their family’s efforts to minimize/and or ignore the importance of their identities

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<sup>120</sup> Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) xiii.

as devoted women. Edith was forthright to her family about her identity as a devoted woman in a devoted partnership, yet her family continued to minimize the importance of her devoted identity and her partnership with Frieda. In turn, Frieda attempted to garner affection for Edith within her family home and hoped to avoid a confrontation between her mother and Edith. When this strategy did not work, Frieda and her mother were forced to survive each other's disappointment in that each was not the person that the other had hoped they would be. Frieda's mother was disappointed, but the letters suggest that they still loved each other. Edith's family attempted to ignore Edith's devotion, yet Edith and her mother still remained connected. Importantly, however, Frieda and Edith, in relation to their families and themselves, affirmed their identities as devoted women in a devoted partnership.

### Chapter Three

#### Modern Culture and Sexual Intimacy

This age of rush, worry, noise, telephone, tubes, cocktails,  
bobbed hair, bolshevism, and reckless gaiety.

Frieda Fraser, 1927<sup>1</sup>

Edith and Frieda's correspondence was an artifact of 1920s modernism. The technologies of modernism made their correspondence possible while the culture of modernism shaped its character. As a result of modern technology, Edith and Frieda sustained a prolific and almost daily dialogue with each other. As an effect of the culture of modernism, Frieda and Edith's discussions regarding their sexual intimacy revolved around the modern cultural context of their same-sex intimate relationship.

The first section of this chapter looks at modern technology and explores how the Fraser/Williams correspondence was a product of these technologies. Some of these technologies included global postal services, steam travel, modern treatment of disease, the telegraph, telephones, and fountain pens. This section documents the ways in which modern technology propelled the development of Edith and Frieda's intimate relationship.

In the second half of this chapter, I explain how modern culture shaped Edith and Frieda's relationship. Edith and Frieda identified as modern women, yet in terms of their sexual identity, the couple did not see themselves entirely reflected by modern cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 3 April 1927, File 1, Box 036, FFPR.

discourse regarding women's same-sex sexuality. The modern sexual discourse as discussed by Edith and Frieda focused on science, literature, and the theatre, all of which featured debates regarding intimate relations between women. The correspondence suggests that Frieda and Edith were familiar with modern scientific debates regarding women's homosexuality, literary proscriptions regarding women's homosexuality, and demonizing portrayals of lesbians in theatre. Thus, the second part of this chapter looks to each of these debates as discussed in the correspondence in an effort to understand the degree to which Edith and Frieda defined their partnership in relation to 1920s modern culture.

How was the correspondence modern? The correspondence was a material artifact of modern technology and also was a written document of modern culture. The Fraser/Williams correspondence reflected key technological and cultural elements of modernism. In his discussion of modernism, Ben Singer emphasizes (1) an explosion of socioeconomic and technological development, (2) the reign of instrumental rationality, (3) a condition of cultural discontinuity and ideological reflexivity, (4) heightened mobility and circulation of all "social things," (5) a milieu of social atomization and competitive individualism, and (6) a perceptual sensory environment of unprecedented complexity and intensity.<sup>2</sup> Frieda and Edith described their modern world in terms of these elements. The women remarked upon technological advances such as steamships, lung surgery techniques, x-ray machines, oscillographs, zippers, and "push pens." They relied upon the rationality of instrumentation. The two women frequently discussed their

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

weight and body temperatures as measurable reflections of their health and well-being. At the same time, they embraced modern modes of communication as they broke with earlier styles of correspondence and emphasized self-reflection, intensity, and desire. Frieda and Edith's relationship, as documented in their letters, also represented a break from their mothers' ways of living. Edith and Frieda viewed their devoted relationship as a new living experiment that was discontinuous from their mothers' traditions. "In all things social and global," they educated themselves about the world in the form of books, lectures, travel, and plays. And in the rarified atmosphere of competitive individualism, Frieda and Edith viewed their and other people's personal successes and failures in terms of individual merit. Lastly, in the modern context of unprecedented complexity, Edith and Frieda's letters indicated their experiences of disjuncture between the sensorial environment of the city and the country. Their correspondence reflects in myriad ways their complicated experience of the modern world.

### **Modern Technology and the Fraser/Williams Correspondence**

"To be modern," David Harvey notes, "is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"<sup>3</sup> The feeling of the rapid pace of modern life was palpable in Frieda's reference to the 1920s as "this age of rush, worry, noise, telephone, tubes, cocktails, bobbed hair, bolshevism, and reckless gaiety."<sup>4</sup> Modern technology influenced both the materiality of the correspondence and Frieda's and Edith's life experiences. How did modern technology shape the Fraser/Williams correspondence and accelerate Frieda and Edith's same-sex intimate relationship?

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<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 3 April 1927, File 1, Box 036, FFPR.



Frieda's and Edith's letters are material artifacts of modern technologies. As single middle class women working in the public sector, Frieda and Edith had sufficient time, opportunity, resources, and education to write as often as, and in the manner that, they did. The size of the correspondence was a direct reflection of their opportunities as modern single women. Technological advances in writing instruments and the low cost and high frequency of the post were evidenced by the sheer number of letters produced by Edith and Frieda during the mid-1920s. Indeed, Frieda and Edith availed themselves of the optimal aspects of postal culture during the years that occasioned the largest and most critical portion of their writing. In addition, Frieda's and Edith's educational and class statuses merged in a way that offered them a sense of the cultural relevance of their correspondence and the opportunity to preserve their correspondence. Frieda's and Edith's professional middle-class status afforded them the luxury of time, space, and awareness in the preservation of their correspondence.

One powerful symbol of modern technology was the passenger steamship, and its presence loomed large in the Fraser/Williams correspondence. Emblematic of the modern world, the passenger steamship was equipped with modern conveniences such as electric lights, elevators, laundries, telephones, telegraph services, and the capacity to move large numbers of people.<sup>5</sup> Edith's first letters of the archived correspondence were written aboard the R.M.S. *Ascania*, a modern steamship, en route to London.<sup>6</sup> Her ship-board letters celebrated the excitement of modern technology in her references to the on-board telephones:

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>6</sup> The R.M.S. *Ascania*'s maiden voyage was in 1924. Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

At 11 they brought the telephone on board and I fell on it—it was quite amusing as they took such ages and I hopped about like a cat on a hot bricks until they got you.<sup>7</sup>

Later the structure of the Fraser/Williams correspondence was affected by the rhythm of the two-week steamship Atlantic crossings. Often the correspondence was delivered in two-week packets, an echo of the iconic steamship. On those occasions when Edith was travelling by steamship, shipboard telegraph and telephone services were severely limited and the mail service was bound by the next port of call.

Edith and Frieda used modern technology to affirm their affection and keep the object of their affection close by. Photographs for example, symbolized their attachments and affirmed their imagined images of their beloved. Shortly after Edith's departure from Frieda, Edith wrote:

Will you send me a picture of yourself with slicked hair? I want to decide whether I like it or not. If I feel that I can't love you with slicked [hair], I shall stay here, even if I have to resort to the dole.<sup>8</sup>

Edith kept a photograph of Frieda on her desk at the Ontario Government Office in London. She remarked to Frieda that, after looking at the photograph on Edith's desk, people asked, "Who is the dear little girl?"<sup>9</sup> Edith did not record her response. Nevertheless, Edith used the modern photographic medium to claim a modern relationship in public space.

Modern technologies were also the subject of some of Frieda's sketches. In one drawing, Frieda depicted herself making offerings at the foot of a local mailbox in an attempt to influence postal expediency. Here, Frieda's desire to speed up their letters was

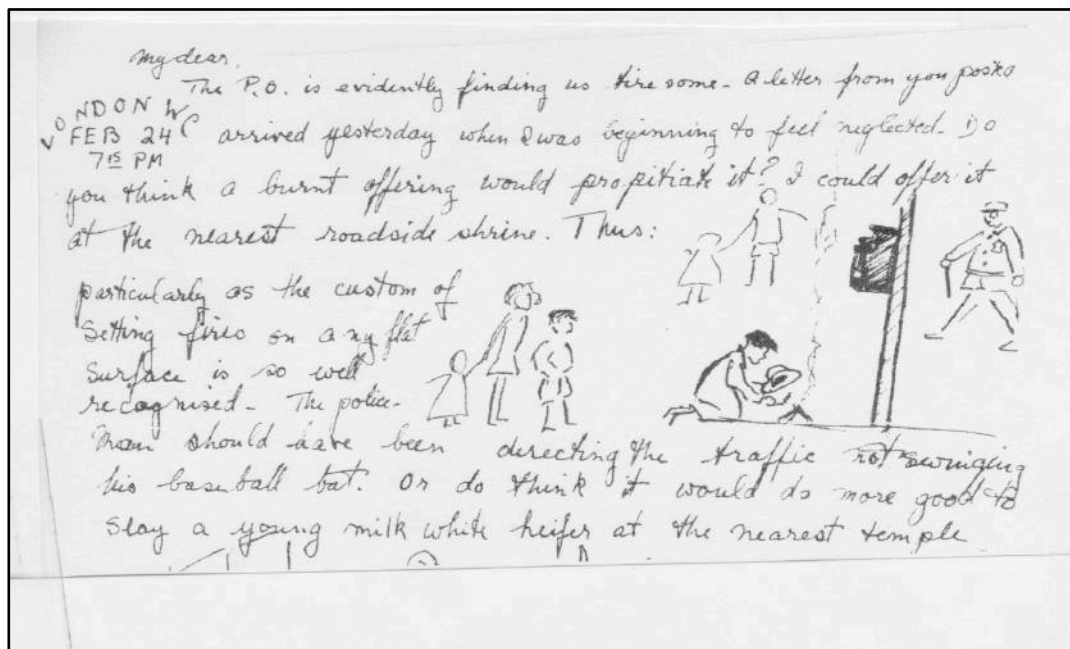
<sup>7</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 June 1926, File 4, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>8</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 16 August 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>9</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 1 July 1926, File 05, Box 010, FFPR.

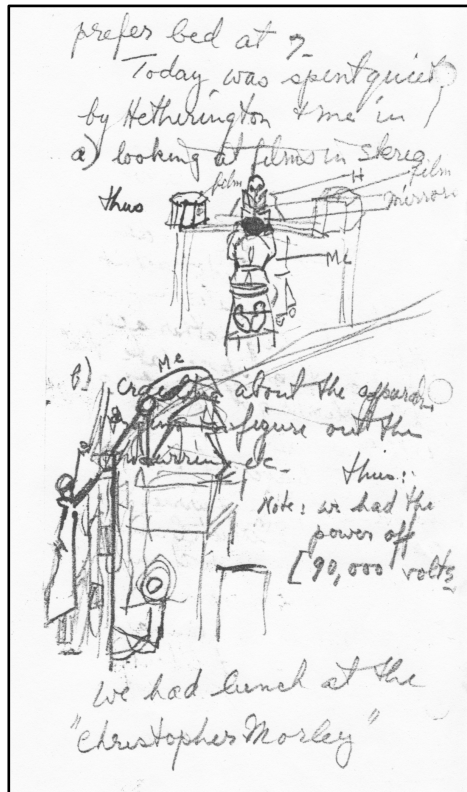
symbolized with a modernist preoccupation with time and efficiency. Frieda noted in her sketch,

The P.O. is evidently finding us tiresome. A letter from posted [Frieda had drawn the postal stamp] Feb 24 7:15, arrived just yesterday when I was beginning to feel neglected. So you think a burnt offering would propitiate it? I could offer it at the nearest roadside shrine. Thus: particularly as the custom of setting fires on any flat surface is so well recognized. The policeman should have been directing traffic not swinging his baseball bat. Or do you think it would do more good to slay a young milk white heifer at the nearest temple?<sup>10</sup>



In another drawing, Frieda portrayed herself as the operator of a large and potentially dangerous x-ray machine that could expose her body to 90,000 volts. She drew herself and another intern as small figures placed between two large machine components.

<sup>10</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 10 March 1926, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

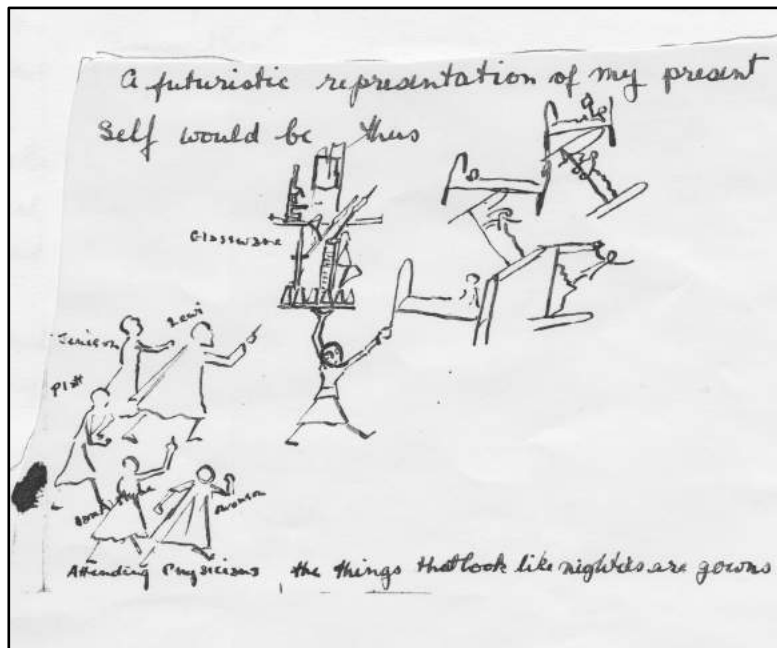


Oddly, given her rendering of this machine as bulky and awkward, Frieda acknowledged a particular beauty in the diagnostic results yielded by this x-ray machine. The diagnosis was of tuberculosis, a disease brought to epidemic proportions as a result of modern urbanization, poverty, and globalization. Frieda wrote:

Lord, I wish you could come here and let me take a decent picture of your chest. We have got a technique now that makes lungs look like an excised preparation. It is beautiful.<sup>11</sup>

In the second half of this drawing, the x-ray machine was rendered as having broken down and Frieda sketched herself and her intern friend Raleigh as attempting its repair. In another sketch, Frieda depicted herself as the overwhelmed intern, a juggler of breakable medical instruments and occupied hospital beds.

<sup>11</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 5 March 1927, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.



Through these and other vignettes, Frieda conveyed to Edith her experience of life in the modern technological world. The sketches portrayed Frieda's modern experience as an urban working woman. Her drawings depicted her at the mercy of the mystery of the postal service and at the mercy of the mystery of large machinery. In relation to people, Frieda was the overwhelmed juggler of patients.

Consciousness of the quick passage of time, another hallmark of modern culture, was also evident in the Fraser/Williams correspondence. "The [modern] artist," Harvey states, "had to represent the eternal through an instantaneous effect. Modernism could speak to the eternal only by freezing time in all its fleeting qualities."<sup>12</sup> Frieda's sketches of herself as the stressed intern represented the modern demand for more productivity in less time. Frieda noted that writing with a push pen enabled her to write more material in

<sup>12</sup> Harvey, 19.

less time. The newly invented zipper, remarked upon by Frieda, was patented under a modern slang word that came to denote “speed.” Frieda’s comments on the postal service were indicative of the attention the two women paid to the quick passing of hours:

The postal service is beyond praise, a letter of yours arrived in 7 days 22 1/2 hours from the time of stamping.<sup>13</sup>

Edith and Frieda’s letters suggest that their experience of time translated into what Ann Douglas refers to as “clock culture.” Douglas writes that “time had become a commodity”; one could “buy time, pass the time, steal time, spend time, borrow time, mark time waste time, kill time, do time, and be on time”<sup>14</sup> Everything was measured. Douglas, in one example, singles out the invention and popularity of the Detecto bathroom scale, on which one’s weight was “a matter of daily and calculated vigilance.”<sup>15</sup> Edith and Frieda frequently reported their current weight and body measurements. Frieda’s letters referenced her attempts to put weight on her 98-pound frame, while Edith’s letters depicted her struggle with weight gain. Edith wrote from London in 1927:

I wish you’d get a bit better, 100 lbs. would be much nicer, darling, isn’t it dreadful to think that I usually weigh half as much again as you do?<sup>16</sup>

Modern obsessions with measurement were evident in Frieda’s and Edith’s frequent notations of the hour of the day when they wrote, ate, and went to sleep and the hour of the night when they awakened. If either woman had a cold, her body temperature was included as well. While in Scotland in 1925, visiting her aging aunts, Edith recounted her

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<sup>13</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 11 May 1927, File12, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday Press, 1996), 39.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 24 January 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

daily routine to Frieda:

I discovered while with Barbara why Glaswegians have such peculiar figures.

They eat as follows:

8:00 Tea and Bread and Butter

9:00 Breakfast (large)

11:00 Milk and Biscuits

1:00 Lunch (large)

4:00 Tea (simply thousands of sweetcakes)

7:00 Dinner (very large)

10:00 Tea and Biscuits

And a few biscuits beside your bed to nibble in the night.<sup>17</sup>

This reflected Edith's modern approach to making lists and to weight awareness.

Modern technologies significantly shaped the material appearance of the Fraser/Williams correspondence, and by extension, their intimate relationship. The regular sailing of ocean liner directed much of the dependable rhythm of the correspondence and kept alive their long-distance relationship. The frequent postal service accelerated their letters' deliveries and maintained a sense of immediacy regarding their intimate and daily lives. In addition, modern writing instruments facilitated the quick writing of these letters from their workplace desk or hospital station. Photographs affirmed the presence of the loved one and Edith used typewriters from her workplace to disguise and protect that presence. Frieda's sketches described her experience of the modern pace of life. Modern measuring devices were used by the two women to record details of their daily lives and to measure the health of their bodies. This provided a measured, mental image of the other's physical well-being. The latest advances in x-ray technology were employed by Frieda in order to get a proper picture of

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<sup>17</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 July 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

Edith's potential tuberculosis, itself a modern epidemic. Indeed modern technology influenced Edith's and Frieda's experiences of their world.

### **Modern Culture and the Fraser/Williams Correspondence**

#### **Writing and Literature**

Frieda and Edith wrote to each other about their lives from their social positions as modern single women. They were participants in modern life, however, rather than creators. To "have enough to get by" was an ever-present concern in the Fraser/Williams correspondence. Frieda, Edith, and many other single women of their generation were employed in jobs that were generally female-dominated and poorly paid. The single women mentioned in the correspondence held positions as shop clerks, office typists, ships' conductresses, housekeepers, cooks, social workers, nurses, mannequins, and store managers. The modern single woman's life, as suggested by the correspondence, was lived in the company of women in shared flats, public transit, lunches outdoors, long walks, inexpensive lecture series, cheap theatre seats, shared or repaired clothing, and hand-me-down dresses. Indeed, writing and reading letters were economical means for modern single women to pass the time in positive and creative ways.

The Fraser/Williams correspondence underscores Virginia Woolf's belief that modernism offered women the opportunity of writing about their own experiences.<sup>18</sup> Edith and Frieda wrote with a self-reflexivity that questioned their passions, their sexualities, the lives of their friends, and the modern age in which they lived. Their distinctive writing styles were also modern. For example, the women broke with the letter

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<sup>18</sup> Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 28.



writing etiquette that had been emblematic of earlier decades. Earlier discourses had counseled female letter writers to consider the letter's "agreeable appearance" to both the eye and the mind, because the appearance of the letter demonstrated the author's character.<sup>19</sup> Letter-writing etiquette of earlier decades advised the use of proper pens and the best writing paper. Frieda and Edith, in contrast, wrote on whatever stationery was available, steamship stationery, University Women's Club stationery, medical chart paper, tiny sheets of lined note paper, and large sheets of writing paper. The women used pencils if necessary. Letter writing etiquette overtly disdained space-saving practices such as "crossing the letters" (writing outside traditional writing areas) and denounced overt displays of emotion.<sup>20</sup> Frieda habitually wrote along and above the margins of her letters in order to complete her letters and maximize space. The legibility of Frieda's handwriting varied according to the size of the writing paper. Edith and Frieda often used contemporary slang and on occasion wrote angrily in bold pen strokes, scribbled notes, scratched out words, drew jokes, and included sketches.

Modern culture of the 1920s affected not only how and what Frieda and Edith wrote, but also how and what they read; modern literature, for example offered diverse perspectives on same-sex intimate desires. The global connections of modern culture exposed Frieda and Edith to experiments with new living arrangements, new career and education possibilities, and new forms of sexual expression.<sup>21</sup> An example of this can be seen in Frieda's description of her and Edith's relationship in terms of translated Chinese

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<sup>19</sup> Deidre M. Mahoney, " 'More than an Accomplishment': Advice on Letter Writing From Nineteenth-Century American Women," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66 (November 2003): 418.

<sup>20</sup> Deidre M. Mahoney, 419.

<sup>21</sup> Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 7.

verse:

The river of our affection  
Was a jubilant torrent  
In spring

Now its slender thread  
Binds the parched fields  
To life

It will be golden  
With the drifting leaves  
Of autumn

Under the ice  
It will flow  
Swiftly on <sup>22</sup>

As modern women, Frieda and Edith conformed to Ann Douglas's portrayal of modern voracious appetites for non-fiction as well as fiction, to which the list of books mentioned by Edith and Frieda between 1925 and 1927 attests.<sup>23</sup> The books discussed in the Fraser/Williams correspondence include A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh, Orphan Island by May Sinclair, The Growth of the Soil, His Brother's Face by Dhan Mukerji, Pen by Kurt Hansen, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, The Travelers by Osler, In Darkest London (recommended to Edith by a friend, but for Edith too awful for words), The Romany Stain by Storm, The Face of Silence, Beatrice d'Este and Her Count, Crewe Train, The Constant Nymph, The Koran, La Garconne, The Letters of Dorothy Osborne, Stories of Paris by Leonard Merrick, William by E.H. Young, The Letter of W.H. Page, The Letters of Strachey, The Letters of Isabella d'Este, The End of the Road: Sonnets of Hi Bellois, The Poems of Alice Mayell, The Path to Rome by Alice Mayell,

<sup>22</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 24 May 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty, 53.

autobiographies of Lady Hamilton and Elizabeth Blackwell, and La Prisonnier by Bourbet.

The viewpoints of people who had read books that discussed or referenced same-sex intimacy between women also influenced Frieda's and Edith's perceptions of their intimate relationship. Edith demonstrated this in October 1926. From England she wrote about having asked a fellow employee's opinion of same-sex intimate relationships between women:

I asked Mrs. Shanks in my job what she thought of women who were devoted to each other, and I got a very detailed account of their "goings-on." I'm afraid I'll have to wait and tell you. The lady has a great command of language and a passion for detail – it is most amazing. She has also drawn a veil over some of her knowledge, but I should think that by the end of the winter she will tell. My feeble mind can't imagine more than she had already told me but she hints darkly at other things – I wonder where she picks it up.<sup>24</sup>

Edith did not indicate where Mrs. Shanks had picked up her information. But by this time, both in England and in America, Mrs. Shanks would have been exposed to a fair amount of publicity regarding women's "unnaturalness" alongside claims for sexual equality and sexual independence. Single working women were up against a post-World War One discourse urging women to relinquish their newfound public roles, get married, and have babies. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg suggests,

The New Men [of the 1920s], by redefining the issue of female autonomy in sexual terms, were able to portray the New Woman as the enemy of liberated women. Male sex reformers, psychologists and physicians promised a future of emotional support and sexual delights to women who accepted heterosexual marriage—and male economic hegemony. Only the "unnatural" woman, they argued, would continue to struggle with men for economic independence and political power.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 20 October 1926, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>25</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936," in Hidden from History, Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, George Chauncey, eds. (New York: New

The charge of lesbianism, a distinctly modern epithet and increasingly linked to the moniker “unnatural,” was a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers, and educators and the feminist reforms they championed.

Fear of the modern lesbian emerged as the theme of several best-selling novels. In this period concerns about same-sex seduction abounded in lurid tales of single-sex schools, in which the unmarried female schoolteacher was a prime target of suspicion.<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Shanks possibly had read Clemence Dane’s Regiment of Women, a popular novel of the decade. The main character was Clare Hartill, a sadistic lesbian teacher in an all-girls’ school. Regiment of Women received favourable London Times reviews and was reprinted throughout the next two decades.<sup>27</sup> The anti-lesbian sentiment of this book was typical of its era, so much so that virtually any book that was published about lesbians before the 1930s also contained a moral message that condemned lesbianism. One irony, however, was that many of these novels were written by lesbians. Another was that lesbians living in the 1920s were at least afforded a way to read about themselves between the novels’ moralizing lines.<sup>28</sup>

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American Library, 1989), 272.

<sup>26</sup> Lillian Faderman documents the libel case of one particular incident in Scotch Verdict: Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon (New York: Quill, 1983).

<sup>27</sup> Terry Castle, ed. The Literature of Lesbianism: a historical anthology from Aristo to Stonewall (New York: Columbia, 2003), 703.

<sup>28</sup> Certainly the evil lesbian character of popular literature was not new. Sherrie A. Inness, in “Who’s Afraid of Stephen Gordon?: The Lesbian in the United States Popular Imagination of the 1920s,” National Women’s Studies Association Journal 4 no. 3 (1992): 3-19, notes that in 1870 and as late as 1892, Adolphe Berlot published Mademoiselle Giraud, My Wife in which the narrator drowns Berthe, a woman who is depicted as the stereotypical evil lesbian, on the pretext of saving her. Her husband responded with a note thanking the murderer for getting rid of a “reptile.” The difference between this kind of hate literature and the later novels of the 1920s was their moralizing tone. According to Inness, in the 1920s lesbianism was discussed more openly and by a larger audience as “the logical outcome of the era’s fascination with Freud.” As a result, the more overt representation of lesbianism transformed it from an individual problem to a social problem, policed by the social body. Moralizing novels of the 1920s were a measure of this

Edith and Frieda, at least in their correspondence, did not discuss the moralizing lesbian novels of popular modern culture. Perhaps they did not see themselves reflected in literary portrayals of the predatory lesbian. They did, however, share their views of literature that mentioned nonconforming women. In December 1926, Frieda described her recent readings about women who lived outside heteronormative frameworks:

I've been absorbing the accounts of the lives of Lady Hamilton and Elizabeth Blackwell both entertaining enough. I'm interested to find in the former that apparently all would have been forgiven if the public had not been forced to be aware of what was going on. They "offended against good tastes" in not making a pretense of hushing things up. Is it that they were being made party to the lapse [word unclear] by officially being aware of it? Darling do you think we will ever have a little peace?<sup>29</sup>

Frieda's references to Lady Hamilton and Elizabeth Blackwell are both significant. Lady Hamilton was a British woman who, in 1800, scandalized the British public by living openly with two men, one of whom was Lord Nelson. Elizabeth Blackwell was the founder of New York's Hospital for Indigent Women and Children and the first woman to receive a medical degree in the United States. She likely attracted Frieda's attention because she founded the hospital in which Frieda worked, she remained single all her life, she intentionally lived independent of male support, and she adopted a daughter. The controversy that surrounded her life was connected to the life long devotion of her adopted daughter, Kitty Barry. In 1876 a young suitor Alfred Sachs, aged 26, was interested in the 55 year-old Elizabeth Blackwell. Blackwell's liege Kitty, aged 29, was in love with Alfred Sachs and was jealous of Blackwell. Blackwell used her conversations with young Sachs as the foundation of her 1878 publication on the moral

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policing social commentary.

<sup>29</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 1 January 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.

education of children. After the pamphlet was published, all ties to Sachs were ended.

Kitty Barry remained devoted to Blackwell. The fact that Frieda followed her comments about Lady Hamilton and Elizabeth Blackwell by asking “do you think we will ever have a little peace?” suggests that Frieda also viewed her relationship with Edith as potentially scandalous. One can surmise that the reason for this was that Frieda saw her relationship as similarly outside the heteronormative framework.

That same month, while spending Christmas with her friend Mollie Calder (who was at the time devoted to and living with Edith Clark), Edith responded with a remark about an advice book that she had picked up:

I read a book written between 1875-86 the other day containing much advice to young women, the chiefest of which was to warn them against intense friendships with women. It was quite advisable to have a number of quite good friends but no one to whom you were particularly attached, and it wasn't well to see a see a friend more than once a week. Moll and I asked Mrs. Calder what she thought of it and she thinks it is sound advice. We then asked what she thought of us [Mollie and Edith Williams] and she said that couldn't be helped under the circumstances but that it wasn't a good idea; and that she quite realized that we were sensible girls etc. It amuses me that Moll is a sensible girl when in my company and not in Edith's [Clark's] and also the same applies to me in other directions. So my lamb, we have reason to be thankful that we weren't in our Mother's generation or we would have had less peace than we have now.<sup>30</sup>

In this passage, Edith referenced an advice book addressed to young women that was published in the decades when same-sex intimate attachments were first pathologized in England. Edith and her friend Moll, more than forty years later, read the book for amusement with the knowledge that both of them were attached in the intense ways that the book described. Edith and Moll had a bit of fun in their questions to Mrs. Calder, because they were exactly the kinds of “girls” against whom the book cautioned. In her

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<sup>30</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 January 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

response, Frieda also had fun with it, answering Edith's comments about the book:

Does your book of advice to young women offer any suggestions as to what they should do if they are so unwise as to have seen another young woman more than once a week or written to her more than four times a year?<sup>31</sup>

Frieda was flirting in her insinuation that she and Edith were women who wrote and saw each other more than was recommended. In this case, the advice literature, as humorous as it might have been, also pointed out to Edith and Frieda that theirs was a type of relationship that was not encouraged. The fact that Edith and Frieda could take this in stride points to their sense of comfort, trust, and stability in their intimate relationship. It also signals their sense of a generational difference. Ultimately, Edith and Frieda knew themselves to be right in their feelings for each other.

The influence of modern popular literature was also evident in the opinions of close friends and family members. Helene Fraser, Frieda's mother, took careful counsel from her closest friend Nettie Bryant, who recounted her perception of mannish lesbians. Writing to Helene from Pennsylvania Nettie observed,

As to Bud [Edith] the reaction that I have felt in realizing that she was not after all of the nature of that repulsive abnormal creature, I read of in that book – has resulted in a more tolerant leniency (perhaps that is expressing it a bit too strongly – as it might seem to you) – (even as you yourself could not help being conscious of – if you had read the thing!<sup>32</sup>

Nettie's letter indicated that she, like Edith's Mrs. Shanks, was familiar with novels that featured lesbian characters. Nettie might have read Clemence Danes's book Regiment of Women (1917) or a similar book that featured women characters who kept their hair short, sported a masculine appearance, and held strange seductive powers over

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<sup>31</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 6 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>32</sup> Antoinette Bryant to Helene Fraser, 23 April 1927, File 03, Box 036, FFPR

susceptible young women. Other possibilities that featured these types of characters were Painted Veils (1920) by James Huneker, Elizabeth Russell's The Enchanted April (1922), Ronald Fairbanks' The Flower Beneath the Foot (1923), Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway (1925), Naomie Royce-Smith's The Tortoise-Shell Cat (1925), and Elizabeth Bowen's The Hotel (1927) All of these novels depicted lesbian characters as deeply flawed and deserving of punishment for their affections.<sup>33</sup> Nettie wrote, however, that these literary depictions of lesbians did not mesh with her experience of Edith. She either meant that Edith was not a lesbian or she meant that Edith might be a lesbian but was not a "repulsive abnormal creature."

In Toronto, Frieda's and Edith's families were no doubt similarly exposed. In 1929, the Toronto sensational tabloid *Hush* dedicated four articles to the English obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall. In the spring of 1929, the same tabloid published five more articles devoted to lesbianism, which was described as "one of the vilest of the hidden vices of modern society." Lesbians were cast as "Hell Witches" who threatened to take over Toronto as they had England. One article stated that these women had their own secret form of communication and could recognize each other in secret ways:

The curious freemasonry between these women is most subtle and sensitive and they detect and recognize each other intuitively with uncanny precision. The more abandoned and bolder natures often delight in making their tendency quite obvious.

The tabloid article continued, "These creatures have a cult of their own, and a literature which they seek to flaunt in the open market." The tabloid's "Hell Witches" were

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<sup>33</sup> Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 242.



actually women who found that dressing up as men enabled them to work at men's jobs, earn more pay, and travel more safely. Any woman who protected herself or earned more money by dressing as a man was castigated with the label of lesbian. "Hell witches had awakened in England," the tabloid declared, "Why not Toronto?"<sup>34</sup>

Also in 1929 the *Canadian Forum: A Monthly Journal of Literature and Public Affairs* drew Canadian middle class attention to the English ban of Hall's novel The Well of Loneliness. The article also offered a barometer of Canadian middle class perceptions of lesbians just two years after this section of the Fraser/Williams correspondence. Entitled "A Biological Sin," the article called the efforts of British censors ironic, noting that because of the ban, "thousands of people have read the book and become aware of the facts of inversion who would ordinarily never have seen the book nor become cognizant of the facts which it deals with." Despite the article's description of The Well of Loneliness as making a plea for tolerance of the lesbian, it criticized the novel's sympathetic stance on lesbianism, which likely reflected the viewpoints of the *Canadian Forum's* readership.<sup>35</sup>

The Fraser/Williams correspondence did not specifically refer to The Well of Loneliness, but Edith discussed one controversial novel that featured same-sex intimate relations between women. Entitled La Garconne and written by respected author Victor Margueritte, the book was published in France in 1922 and became a cultural symbol for "les anne'es folles" or the post war crazy years.<sup>36</sup> Edith wrote:

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<sup>34</sup> Steven Maynard, "Hell Witches in Toronto: Notes on Lesbian Visibility in Early-Twentieth Century Canada," *Left History* 9, no. 2 (2004), 191-192.

<sup>35</sup> S.H. Hooke, "A Biological Sin," *Canadian Forum* 9, no. 103 (1928), 243-244.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, "This Civilization No Longer Has Sexes: La Garconne and Cultural Crisis in

I've been reading a book, which is anything but pure, "La Garconne." I came across it a few weeks ago and remembered the fuss there was in '23 when it came out and also that it was banned in England; all this made me interested enough to hold on to it until I had time to read it. It has kept me well amused all week.<sup>37</sup>

The book was condemned by the French Catholic Archbishop and its sale was restricted and forbidden in various countries. Despite the restrictions or because of them, the novel sold more than a million copies in France before 1929 and was translated into 14 languages. By the end of 1923, approximately 25% of the French population had read the book.

La Garconne depicted a modern woman, Monique Lerbier, who rejected her bourgeois family to live and love whomever she desired in Paris. Monique was the middle class girl next door whose behaviour simultaneously shook respectable middle class morality and troubled bourgeois feminists who feared that their cause would become associated with Monique's sexual adventures. Monique was referred to as *la garconne*, a girl-boy, who was "a being without a waist, without hips, and without breasts." She cut her hair short, wore tailored clothing, and acted in masculine-coded manners. She smoked opium, drank cocktails, frequented jazz clubs, and initiated openly sexual affairs, the first of which was with a female star of a music hall. Monique's life eventually became empty, and Monique, ostensibly because of her sexual promiscuity, became sterile. In the end, she was saved by an ailing veteran of the First World War. Monique nursed her beloved veteran back to health, gave up her independent ways, grew her hair, and became the woman in white who sat by the bedside of the wounded. Despite

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France After World War 1" *Gender and History* 4, no. 1 (1992): 44-69.

<sup>37</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 21 January 1927, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

its moralizing theme, the novel provided a cultural template for young French women; indeed, one of the era's most enduring hairstyles for young women was named "La Garçonne."<sup>38</sup>

Part of Edith's attraction to this book was that it was banned in England. Edith was aware of the book's controversy and she chose to read it at a time when she was becoming conscious of the social implications of her own desire for Frieda. But Edith had hoped for more than the book had to offer, writing, "I'm not as impressed with its wickedness as I should be and I was awfully interested."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Edith shared some similarities with the protagonist. She was independent of her middle class family and willing to travel and have new experiences. Monique and Edith also chose women for their first romances. Edith, however, had only one romance, a woman, while Monique claimed attraction to both sexes.

Despite the similarities, Monique was ultimately an unrealistic character for Edith. For Edith, the modern working single woman, was just too busy making a living to maintain a retinue of lovers. Edith remarked:

The chief flaw in it is that this young woman supposedly earns her living at interior decoration and also lives a very hectic life with numerous lovers – one person couldn't have time to do both I should think.<sup>40</sup>

Edith wanted Frieda to read the book, but at the same time she felt that she was unable to send it to America:

I wish I could send it to you. I'd love to know what you would make of it. But we would both be fined—and perhaps you, living in the land of the free could be

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 21 January 1927, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>40</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda, London, 21 January 1927, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

imprisoned for having it.<sup>41</sup>

Though Edith exaggerated her and Frieda's vulnerability to government regulation of literature that portrayed unconventional sexuality, she displayed an awareness that the kinds of sexuality that interested her and Frieda were subject to official sanction. At the same time, as is discussed in the following section, the two women distanced themselves from lesbian identities and preferred to see themselves as devoted partners.

### **Modern Science**

Modern science of the 1920s informed Edith and Frieda about who they were as women and as lovers of women. The Fraser/Williams correspondence portrayed some of the dilemmas that modern science presented to Frieda and Edith regarding their social place as modern single working women and also as women who considered themselves devoted to each other. The modern scientific arguments brought to light in the Fraser/Williams correspondence revolved around the "unnaturalness" of their relationship in terms of the biological "natural order of things" and referenced psychoanalytic views of female homosexuality as either a derailed sexuality or a genetically flawed condition. As scientific women, Edith and Frieda trusted their observations about the health and strength of their bond and communicated their distrust of what the scientific community said to them about their relationship.

The popular notion that intimate female relationships were unnatural was highlighted in Edith's conversation with her aunt Flinda:

Just before I left Aunt F.'s, she told me that her cook and her housemaid--who are by way of being ladies--had never had jobs before, but that their families had been

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<sup>41</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda, London, 21 January 1927, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

rather disagreeable about their being awfully devoted and so they had up and left, and this was the only thing they could do. However, they loved it, as it meant living together. So there reasons to be a fair amount of it about. And they were certainly the happiest looking creatures. I simply tried to talk to them about it. Aunt F. didn't like it much, but at the time she was ill and wouldn't get anyone else who could get on with the nurse and her companion, but she seems to be quite satisfied now. I asked her what her objection was and she said that it wasn't natural! Isn't it funny?"<sup>42</sup>

Edith wrote that her aunt Flinda, when questioned about the relationship between her cook and housemaid, didn't like "it" much, saying that "it" wasn't natural. Flinda, in using the word "natural" relied upon a common view of the "natural" as her authority regarding sexuality.

What was the 1920s modern notion of "natural development" for human sexuality? And how was this reflected in the Fraser/Williams correspondence? The correspondence suggests that Edith and Frieda were aware of scientific theories in addition to Sigmund Freud's ideas regarding the healthy development of human sexuality.

In June 1926, writing from New York, Frieda employed the model of the natural world as a basis in understanding her position in relation to her passions:

No one thinks it indecent of the bees and ants to have developed what is virtually an intersex. In fact they are highly respected – And they do it on a basis of political economy or social hygiene.<sup>43</sup>

In the same letter, Frieda seemed to criticize the notion that not being attracted to men meant that something was wrong with her. From her perspective one of the "ruling instincts of the world," the so-called natural attraction of men for women and women for

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<sup>42</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 August 1925, File 03, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>43</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. June 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

men, was “feeble” in her. In the same paragraph she invoked and critiqued the notion that her lack of heterosexual feelings might be explained in terms of Freudian resistance:

Moreover to be truly womanly, take yours truly (generally allowed to be within normal limits even if barely) if one of the ruling instincts of the world is so feeble that in 26 years it has only called attention to itself by me wanting to pat the hairs of, or kiss the tops of the heads of men engaged in looking down microscopes when I see them from the top, I can’t bring myself to take it too seriously. Of course one could argue a) that I am setting up a resistance to it a la Freud—allowing that – if it is all it is cracked up to be, it should surely be strong enough to break down that much.

Frieda suggested here that she placed little faith in Freud. If attraction to the opposite sex was as strong and inevitable as most people believed it was--“a ruling instinct of the world” --then why did she not feel it? Her life experiences were at odds with these “ruling instincts.” Frieda then intimated that the science of psychoanalysis might regard her challenge to instinct as a form of psychoanalytic “resistance,” but she cleverly responded that if the “ruling instinct” was as powerful as it was said to be, surely it could overpower her individual resistance. Unwilling to concede the meaning of her desires and unwilling to accept these modern scientific concepts, Frieda placed her trust in the pragmatic strength of her own feelings, stating that she could still be a woman and not necessarily be attracted to men. In this instance, Frieda simultaneously revealed her faith in the natural world, her scientific pragmatism, and her distrust of Freud’s theories. In the context of modern scientific theories about sexuality, Frieda was attentive to the *absence* of her attraction towards men. Ultimately, Frieda concluded that there might be “no defense” against the notion that such people “run along in fair numbers.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. June 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

Frieda ended her discussion with the remark, “Why do the heathen rage?”<sup>45</sup> With this rhetorical question she indicated her faith in the superiority of science. Her implication was that the “heathen” were those who were unenlightened by scientific knowledge. The suggestion was that if one were sufficiently intelligent enough, one would be a believer in modern science, and by extension, as a believer in science one would have respect for the diversity of the natural world, thereby accepting the fact that not all women were attracted to men. Frieda thus did not reject science; she rejected scientific claims that were tainted by heathenism.

Frieda and Edith found that they were not alone in their use of science to challenge pseudo-scientific notions that attempted to uphold the natural order of evolution, the natural order understood to mean that women were coupled only to men, and that men were in power. One example of this kind of social commentary that attracted the attention of Frieda’s social milieu was contained in a book entitled, Lysistrata: or Woman’s Future and Future Woman (1925) by Anthony M. Ludovici. In Lysistrata, Ludovici lamented the rise of feminism and foresaw a future in which women would rule England and men were destined for physiological depravity. The cause, Ludovici believed, was that there were more women than men in the English population. This was a situation, he suggested, that gave rise to the presence of “odd women,” or women without men. Ludovici’s solution was a masculine renaissance coupled with polygamy, so that no woman would remain single and “odd women” might not be forced

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to seek out women partners.<sup>46</sup>

Frieda found herself immersed in such a discussion that challenged these sexist commentaries. In February 1926, at tea in Gertrude's Garden, a salon in New York, Frieda reported a conversation among her female friends. Her friends used scientific examples to refute heathen notions of the "natural order." Her friends recalled the diversity of sexes and genders in the natural world. Frieda wrote to Edith:

The problem that seems to be on their minds at the moment was that everlasting odd women. I wonder if there are enough of them to warrant all the fuss – and if they are necessarily abnormal or unhappy or mentally deformed. Gertrude's partner had a pretty idea, she had been reading Lysistrata which seems to be a book deploring the sexlessness of working women, etc. in modern times and how it is against NATURE. She wanted to write an essay from the point of view of the amoeba deploring the modern trend and how terrible this new business of sex-differentiation was so utterly against Nature and so forth as the amoeba was invented before sex differentiation.<sup>47</sup>

After challenging the notion that "odd women" were abnormal, unhappy, or deformed, Frieda reported positively on the comments of Gertrude's partner, who cleverly used scientific knowledge about the natural world to reject the "modern trend" of "sex-differentiation."

Women in partnerships, labeled "odd women" by Ludovici, were not so threatening to Frieda, however. The evolutionary future of women's relationships was a theme that underlay Frieda and Edith's conception of their relationship. The two women saw themselves as part of new trend that was tied to human evolution. For example, only a few weeks earlier, when Edith asked Frieda's permission to speak freely about their

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony M. Ludovici, Lysistrata or Women's Future and Future Women (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1925) Ludovici's book is titled after the Greek play by Aristophanes in which women refused their husbands sexual access in order to put an end to war.

<sup>47</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 2 February 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.



relationship to Edith's friend Molly, Frieda framed the act of sharing this information in evolutionary terms:

Of course I don't mind your telling Molly Calder about us. Why should I? Besides I think she is entitled to it, don't you? And how do you suppose we sprang from the apes if we didn't tell each other all about jumping?<sup>48</sup>

Frieda's reference to having sprung from the apes was a reference to Darwin's theories of evolution, theories that had taken a decidedly social turn in the 1920s. As historian Carl Degler points out,

If conservative social Darwinists interpreted Darwin's message to be that those who today are on top arrived there because they had defeated their less competent rivals, to reformers, Darwin's message was that no one stayed on top because change and adjustment were the order of nature.<sup>49</sup>

Frieda, as a scientifically educated woman, saw the "system of women's partnership" as a step forward in cultural evolution.

Frieda's views regarding the pre-eminence of culture as a determining factor in the evolution of human society were supported by the theories of biologist Julian Huxley, who was familiar to Edith:

Huxley is having a couple of public lectures this week and next, to which M. and I are going. I don't suppose we'll understand anything he is talking about, but I like the gent.<sup>50</sup>

Edith had possibly read Huxley's first work, Essays of a Biologist (1923), which proposed groundbreaking ideas regarding the impact of culture and society upon human evolution. At the time of this public lecture in 1923 Huxley was teaching at King's College, and Edith and her roommate, Mollie Calder, lived nearby.

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<sup>48</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 1 January 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>49</sup> Carl Degler, In Search of Human Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 114.

<sup>50</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 January 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

But Edith never saw Huxley. In a serendipitous turn of events, Edith instead attended a lecture given by one of the foremost sexologists of the day, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld:

One day last week, Moll, Adelaide and I were going to a lecture at King's College at 5:30. When I got there I found a notice that Julian Huxley was still ill and it was off. So I looked about to see what else would be amusing—it turned out to be Dr. Hirschfeld or is it Hatfield – on the mind from a Psycho-Therapeutics point of view. I was much interested and he was most amusing. There weren't many people there, but the ones who were, got awfully chatty. According to Hadfield [sic] we're the most depraved creatures – does he know what he is talking about? So you think we are? It is extraordinary that I and apparently you too, should feel so extremely young and innocent and pure under the circumstances.<sup>51</sup>

Edith's comments about Hirschfeld were brief, curious, and revealing. Hirschfeld was a noted German Jewish physician and sexologist who in 1897 founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, an organization committed to abolishing Germany's sodomy laws. A year earlier Hirschfeld had published a pamphlet entitled "Sappho and Socrates," in which he put forward his conception of homosexuality as a naturally occurring measure of human sexual diversity. This notion was in contrast to prevailing notions of homosexuality as a sin and a crime, but replaced it with the notion that homosexuality was a disability. In 1918 in Berlin, Hirschfeld founded the Institute of Sex Science, which promoted the notion that homosexuality was an inborn variation; from his standpoint, homosexuality was unchangeable and thus unjustly criminalized. Because Hirschfeld believed homosexuality to be rooted in biology, he argued that personal and social acceptance would alleviate homosexuals' symptoms of mental disturbance.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 31 January 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>52</sup> Elena Mancini, *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom: A History of the First International Sexual Freedom Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Vern L. Bullough, "Magnus Hirschfeld: An Often Overlooked Pioneer," *Sexuality and Culture* 7, no.1 (2003), 62.

At the time of his lecture at Kings' College in 1927, Hirschfeld, had been living in Aldershot near London for the past two years. His monograph, Homosexuality in Men and Women (1914), had recommended adjustment therapy for homosexuals. His suggested course of treatment rested upon the belief that homosexuality alone did not stop one from becoming an able human being and that the homosexual should accept his or her position, work hard, act on his/her inclinations, and try to be open about their homosexuality to family and friends.<sup>53</sup>

Hirschfeld referred to homosexual women as *lesbians* in his work.<sup>54</sup> He likely used this term as well as the phrase "homosexual women" in his lectures, yet Edith did not repeat either designation in her letter to Frieda. Nevertheless, Edith saw herself and Frieda represented in his discussion. As she noted, "According to Hadfield we're the most depraved creatures."

Edith's response to Hirschfeld is telling. It conforms to other evidence, of Edith's simultaneous identification and dis-identification with lesbianism. By using the word "we" in reference to herself and Frieda as the subjects of Hirschfeld's lecture, Edith acknowledged that she and Frieda maintained a same-sex intimate relationship and therefore shared a particular subjectivity with other like-minded women. But then she immediately challenged his knowledge and rejected what she took to be Hirschfeld's conception of their relationship as "depraved," joking to Frieda about the distance between Hirschfeld's notion and their conceptions of themselves as young, innocent, and pure.

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<sup>53</sup> Katz, 152.

<sup>54</sup> Katz, 152.

Indeed, Edith did not employ Hirschfeld's terminology. Hirschfeld used the words "lesbian" and "female homosexual," while Edith and Frieda used the words "devoted," "odd," and, "peculiar." Edith linked the words "lesbian" and "female homosexual" to depravity, which is understandable if leading defenders of homosexuality seemed to endorse this conception. And Edith was unwilling and unable to envision herself as depraved.

Frieda's letters did not mention the famous sexologist, but she also believed her homosexuality to be an unchangeable biological condition. Only a month earlier, Frieda reported to Edith about a conversation with her mother in which she had pointed out that her devotion to Edith was not Edith's fault but rather was linked to a pre-existing "condition:"

Your being away hasn't been of the slightest good to Mother, apparently. We exchanged a few words several days ago. The essence of it was in the end that "something or someone has come between us" and that she thinks is you. Whereupon I pointed out the condition existed long before I knew you. Which surprised her and made her quite miserable I'm afraid. In spite of what she says I think I must be quite fond of her because I can't be hurt by what any one else says a tenth as much.<sup>55</sup>

Frieda's acknowledgement of her pre-existing "condition" was a rare and significant instance in her correspondence for two reasons. The first was that Frieda seldom recounted discussions of her sexuality with her mother. The second is Frieda's frank acknowledgement that her attraction to women was a "condition." In this instance, Frieda referred to her orientation towards other women with a medicalized term, as a condition. This was indicative of two things. First, Frieda thought of herself as *biologically* different

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<sup>55</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 22 December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

from heterosexual women. Second, she believed that her condition was an unchangeable state of existence that pre-existed her relationship to Edith. Employing scientific, biological, and medical terminology, Frieda suggested that her mother not blame Edith, because Frieda had already preferred women, long before she met Edith, and there was only biology to blame.

Thus the Fraser/Williams correspondence suggests that Edith and Frieda engaged with modern scientific discussions of women's same-sex sexualities. Their method of engagement lay in comparisons of their experiences of desire to common sense notions of "Nature" (Aunt Flinda), pseudo-science (Ludovici), psycho-therapeutic science (Hirschfeld, Freud) and evolutionary biology (Darwin, Huxley). The women reported to each other what they encountered or heard and then recounted their own pragmatic experience. Edith wrote about her sense of well being as a way to distance herself from what she perceived to be Hirschfeld's claims. In the same way, Frieda used her lack of attraction to men in order to discount what she attributed to Freud. At the same time, both women looked to modern theories of evolutionary biology (Huxley, Darwin), and sexual diversity (Hirschfeld). While Edith and Frieda encountered numerous scientific and pseudo-scientific reflections of what they were not, they continued to believe that modern science provided them with tools and methods to validate their desires.

### **Theatre**

Live theatre also informed Frieda and Edith's perceptions of their desires. The two women took full advantage of the theatre centres in which they were living. The plays they separately attended were numerous. These included Peter Pan, Hay Fever, The

Best People, Do Tell Timothy, Charlie's Aunt, The Madras House, Dybbuk, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Hamlet, Is Zat So? Broadway, What Everywoman Knows, The Constant Nymph, and Rain.

Controversial work did not deter Edith and Frieda from the theatre. Both women, for example, attended the play Rain, which was banned from performance in Toronto. In Rain, Sadie Thompson, a prostitute, is befriended by the American military and raped by an American minister. Frieda saw the play in New York, while Edith saw it in London. Based on Somerset Maugham's book Miss Thompson, Rain's unsavoury representation of the clergy, its depiction of sexual violence, and its sympathy for prostitutes made the production unsuitable for Toronto audiences, but Edith and Frieda took advantage of their presence in other cities to see the play.

Another controversial play discussed in Frieda and Edith's correspondence was also commonly regarded as unsuitable for general audiences. The Captive, which was written by Edouard Bourdet, dealt with lesbianism. Neither woman had the opportunity to see The Captive, which Jonathan Ned Katz and Terry Castle describe as one of the most controversial plays of the decade. Frieda and Edith were, however, witnesses to its cultural repercussions. Frieda, in Philadelphia at this time, wrote to Edith in London:

Do you know anything about The Captive? Elspeth seems to have got quite worked up about it. At least she wrote to me clamouring for information. It always makes me feel like such a simple. I don't know whether it is lack of interest or "looking wise" or mental dullness but I seem to know less about the kind of thing people expect one to than the average or less than average lay person.<sup>56</sup>

Edith answered Frieda sympathetically:

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<sup>56</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 7 January 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

I don't know anything about The Captive, - in fact I've never even heard about it! So I am apparently in the same state of ignorance as you are – Perhaps we like each other because we both have such pure minds.<sup>57</sup>

The Captive addressed a young woman's sexual obsession with the wife of a friend of her fiancé. Written by Edouard Bourdet (1887-1945), a popular playwright of the 1920s and 1930s, The Captive was originally titled La Prisonnierre. La Prisonnierre was a smash hit in Paris, Brussels, and Berlin, despite repeated attempts to have it shut down. In England, the play was banned outright, while in America it was adapted by Arthur Hornblow Jr. and renamed The Captive. Starring Basil Rathbone and Helen Mencken, the play opened at the prestigious Empire Theatre in New York in September 1926 and ran for 160 standing room only performances. Listed in The Best Plays of 1926-1927, Burns Mantle summed up the story as follows:

Irene de Montcel, ordered by her diplomatist father to be prepared to move from Paris to Brussels, refuses to go. De Montcel, suspecting Irene is held by the fascination a degenerate woman companion exerts for her, insists upon her going. To escape submission Irene begs a girlhood sweetheart to marry her. Jacques, though warned by the husband of the degenerate that such a marriage cannot be successful, agrees to Irene's proposal. A year later they are returned from their honeymoon. Their marriage has been a failure and Irene, still under the influence of her friend, deserts her husband.<sup>58</sup>

The Captive was raided by the police during its sell out run at the Empire Theatre despite favourable reviews. The sting of the sudden closure was evident four decades later, as Basil Rathbone highlights in his autobiography:

The play was produced without any preproduction publicity with Helen Mencken as Irene and myself as Jacques. Of course there were rumours as to what it was all about since a limited number of Americans had seen the play in Paris, but our first

<sup>57</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 21 January 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>58</sup> Burns Mantle, ed, The Best Plays of 1926-27 (London: Dodd, Mead, 1927), 390.

night audience was completely ignorant of its theme. They were stunned by its power and the persuasiveness of its argument. We were an immediate success and for seventeen weeks we played to standing room only at every performance. At no time was it ever suggested that we were salacious or sordid or seeking sensation.<sup>59</sup>

Katz notes that the New York Times favourably reviewed the play as a “tragedy of a young woman, well bred and of good family, who fell into a twisted relationship with another woman.” The reviewer stated that the “loathsome possibility” was never mentioned and scarcely hinted at, yet “hangs over the drama like a black pall.” The reviewer was thankful that the play did not degenerate into a commercial exploitation of a “revolting theme.”<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless the abrupt sting of the censor left a deep impression. Rathbone later recalled that on the evening of the play’s closure, all the players were told by plainclothes officers, “Please don’t let it disturb your performance tonight but consider yourselves under arrest.”<sup>61</sup> After the end of the performance, the entire cast was taken to night court and released on bail. The management of the play immediately withdrew the show from the stage, leaving the cast without recourse. Rathbone was livid and he described the closing of the play as:

A hideous betrayal, this most infamous example of the imposition of the political censorship on a democratic society ever known in the history of responsible creative theatre; this cold-blooded unscrupulous sabotage of an important contemporary work of art; this cheap political expedient to gain votes by humiliating and despoiling the right of public opinion to express itself and act upon its considered judgement as respected and respectable citizens.<sup>62</sup>

Frieda also criticized the censorship of the play despite favourable reviews:

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<sup>59</sup> Basil Rathbone, In and Out of Character (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 101-102.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, Gay American History (New York: Crowell, 1976), 82.

<sup>61</sup> Rathbone, In and Out of Character, 101-102.

<sup>62</sup> Rathbone, 105.



I hear The Captive is being shut up in New York after a four month run, without charge. It was reviewed as “an incidentally respectable” play too. Evidently New York is going to be made quite pure. Presently they will institute compulsory mental de-lousing stations for the citizens. It ought to be working as well as prohibition.<sup>63</sup>

In the following passage Edith was determined to discover what the fuss was all about and why the play was so awful. Both women had seen Rain; Edith wondered if The Captive could be much worse. Edith wrote:

Do tell me about The Captive. People do nothing but refer to it and the papers are full of allusions but no one says what it is about. Why is it so awful? Or am I too young?<sup>64</sup>

The Captive was an affront, to those who preferred to think of lesbians as born monsters. The play suggested that beautiful, sane, well-to-do, women of good families and upbringing could become lesbians. To literary critic Terry Castle, in terms of 1920s modern theatre, The Captive offers an “unusually worldly and nonjudgmental” view of the characters. In addition, Castle notes that the audience never saw the older seductress, a design that Castle describes as brilliant.<sup>65</sup> The audience could only imagine what this lesbian might look like.

Historian Sherri Inness, commenting on the invisible seducer, Mme. D’Aiguines, notes that the only signs of her presence were countless bunches of violets sent to the younger Irene. Inness suggests that Madame D’Aiguines’s power lay in resistance to classification, that she could be identified not by her voice, nor her mannerisms. An invisible lesbian was more frightening to an audience than a visible one—not only invisible on stage, as this play depicted, but also invisible in the world at large.

<sup>63</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 11 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>64</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 16 March 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>65</sup> Terry Castle, 801.

Nevertheless the effects wrought by this unseen character were devastating.

Despite its short run, the play caused a public discussion of “the lesbian.” When The Captive opened in New York, Helen Mencken was dressed in the costume of a contemporary flapper—wearing a close-fitting, knee-high dress, high heels, long strands of beads, and a cloche. In this way, the play linked modern lesbianism to the modern heterosexual image of the flapper. Inness ruminates:

One can imagine the uneasy stirs in the audience on 29 September 1926, at the opening of The Captive when individual women realized that they themselves were dressed very much like Irene.<sup>66</sup>

A lesbian could be any woman, even an attractive, engaged flapper. The theme of the lesbian as everywoman was dramatically emphasized by the offstage staging of the invisible yet powerful presence of the older seductress Mme D’Aiguines. A lesbian seductress could be any married woman and her presence had only to be imagined. Indeed the phrase “The Captive Theme” was a code for lesbianism in film throughout the 1930s.<sup>67</sup>

After the play was closed down, Frieda and many of her co-workers were inspired to read the book upon which the play was based. Frieda wrote from Philadelphia:

One of the kids here invited me to read The Captive, which I did in about an hour. Anyway there isn’t anyone fit to speak to in The Captive except the younger sister – Curious the way people regard deviations from the norm as necessarily evil unless they can be classed as genius and even that isn’t pure praise – I wonder if the mother of the first semi-erect anthropoid was ashamed of it?<sup>68</sup>

Frieda did not identify with any of the characters in The Captive, in the same manner that

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<sup>66</sup> Sherrie Inness, “Who’s Afraid of Stephen Gordon?: The Lesbian in the United States Popular Imagination of the 1920s” NWSA Journal 4, no. 3 (1992), 305.

<sup>67</sup> Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 58.

<sup>68</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

Edith could not identify with the character of Monique in *La Garconne* or the subjects of Hirschfeld's lecture. Though Frieda did not specify the reasons, we can suppose that class differences may have been at play, as the lesbians in *The Captive* did not need to make their own living. The lesbian characters in *The Captive* came from wealth and married into wealth. Moreover, Irene [Helen Mencken] might have *looked* like the women in the audiences, but she was not every woman in the audience. Frieda was not a flapper. And we can suppose also that Frieda did not see herself in the character of the seductress a wealthy woman whose marriage to a man disguised her hypnotic effects on younger women. The fact that she was always offstage and depicted as a monster made identification even more difficult. Thus it is no surprise that Frieda did not connect with the characters on stage. There were significant differences between Frieda's self-understanding as a woman with an innate predisposition to love women and the depictions of lesbians in *The Captive*.

Modern literature, science, and the theatre offered forums in which Frieda and Edith participated in the discussion of women's same-sex sexualities. These revealed women's same-sex sexuality to be highly contested, enough to lead to the banning of books, the closing of theatre productions, and the pathologization of women who loved other women. In literature, Frieda and Edith witnessed "bad living" as a cause of lesbian passion. In science, they witnessed pathologizing explanations of their same-sex intimate sexual object choice. In the theatre, lesbianism was metaphorically from "another world," and lesbianism was seductive and contagious. Cultural and scientific representations in (*The Captive* and Dr. Hirschfeld's lecture, for example) ostensibly offered more

favourable views of women's same-sex sexuality, but still did not reflect Edith's and Frieda's realities. Frieda and Edith witnessed grand cultural and scientific disputes over the meanings of "lesbianism," yet none of these discussions offered depictions that represented Edith's and Frieda's intimate reality as devoted women. It was as if the modern world in which they lived did not recognize who they were and they did not recognize themselves in modern culture.

Thus when faced with scientific, literary and theatrical representations of women's same-sex sexual desires, Edith and Frieda contested what they saw. They countered these portrayals with the pragmatism of personal experience and evidence from "hard" science. In the course of their arguments Edith and Frieda came to realize who they were by naming what they were not. By extension, in knowing what they were not, Edith and Frieda imagined the kind of woman that they desired to be. The correspondence suggests that they saw some possibilities of who they might become reflected not in the current cultural discourses of science, literature or the theatre, but in personal knowledge of other devoted women, and especially of each other.

In a March 1927 letter, Frieda referred to their relationship and added in closing, "hope deferred..." She did not finish the phrase, likely assured of Edith's familiarity with the biblical proverb. Edith would have known the full quotation: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when desire cometh it is a tree of life."<sup>69</sup> I believe that at that moment Frieda felt heartsick for Edith and used the biblical reference to describe her feeling of it. But the second half of the passage also indicated that her desire for Edith was attached to

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<sup>69</sup> Proverbs 13:12.

the relief of her suffering. Without the prospect of Edith, Frieda had no hope, but when Frieda experienced desire with hope, her suffering had meaning. In the modern sense of using traditional tools in new ways, Frieda quoted a proverb from the Old Testament in order to give meaning to the emotional struggles of their devotions, devotions that were shaped by 1920s modern technology and culture.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how Edith and Frieda's intimate relationship was shaped by 1920s modernism. Their letters were replete with references to the pace of modern life, to the differences between their generation and their mothers' to new employment opportunities that opened for women, and to the regular barrage of new inventions to which they were exposed. This chapter has examined how the cultural and technological developments of this period affected Edith and Frieda. The chapter stresses that the two women were products and users of modernism, but not necessarily producers of it. They were not artists yet they employed much of what 1920s modernist technology and culture had to offer. Moreover, this chapter has highlighted the ways in which Edith's and Frieda's lives were informed by and in dialogue with modern technological and cultural developments.

Modern technologies were used by Frieda and Edith in a way that significantly shaped the material appearance of the Fraser/Williams correspondence. The first section of this chapter explored how the Fraser/Williams correspondence was a material artifact of technologies offered by 1920s modernism. Here I demonstrated how Edith and Frieda availed themselves of the technological developments of 1920s in constructing their

written correspondence. The sheer size of the correspondence was a direct effect of these technologies. Some of these technologies included the globalization of the post office, the frequency of Atlantic crossings, and easy access to writing materials. All of these technologies made it possible for the two women to maintain their close emotional connection.

In addition, Edith's and Frieda's social and class positions, which were engendered by the modern technologies, provided the women the opportunities to afford the optimal aspects of postal culture during the most critical portion of their letter writing. Edith's employment in a steno-pool was a direct reflection of the modern age in which she lived, as were Frieda's medical internships. The women's occupational positions provided the financial resources and time for writing, while their education provided them with the intellectual impetus to save their letters. Ultimately, their correspondence, in its size, shape and frequency, was material evidence of 1920s modern technologies.

Moreover, this chapter has demonstrated that Frieda and Edith's relationship was shaped outwardly by the technologies of 1920s modernism. The regular sailing of ocean liners directed much of the dependable rhythm of the correspondence and kept alive their long-distance relationship. The frequent postal service accelerated their letters' deliveries and maintained a sense of immediacy regarding their intimate and daily lives. In addition, modern writing instruments facilitated the quick writing of these letters from the workplace desk or the hospital station. Photographs affirmed the presence of the loved one and Edith used typewriters from her workplace to disguise and protect that presence. Frieda's sketches described her experience of the modern pace of life. Modern measuring

devices were used by the women to gauge their daily health, providing a machined-sourced mental image of the other's physical well-being. The latest advances in x-ray technology were employed by Frieda in order to get a proper picture of Edith's potential tuberculosis, itself a modern epidemic. Indeed modern technology characterized Edith's and Frieda's experience of their world. Neither woman could think or write about the other without the context of the modern world. Technology afforded Edith and Frieda the ability to share every aspect of their waking and sleeping lives, and technology framed their same-sex sexual identity as "devoted women."

Whereas 1920s modern technology shaped the outward character of Frieda's and Edith's correspondence, 1920s modern culture shaped what was written within the correspondence itself, and as such, played an important role in how Edith and Frieda viewed themselves and their relationship. The second half of the chapter has documented how Frieda's and Edith's dialogue with 1920s modernism, as carried on in the correspondence, helped them to define who they were not and who they were to each other. This was examined in three major threads: science, literature, and the theatre. In terms of science, Frieda and Edith saw their relationship as an evolutionary step forward. They differed with sexologists about the self-loathing they should experience because of their lesbianism. In terms of literature, Edith and Frieda did not see themselves reflected in the promiscuous lesbian/bisexual protagonist in the best selling novel, La Garconne, nor did they see themselves represented on stage in the spectre of lesbian corruption in The Captive.

In their dialogue with each other and with the cultural aspects of 1920s

modernism, Edith and Frieda defined who they were not. They were not self-loathing, morally depraved, nor promiscuous, as the “lesbian” was often portrayed in modern cultural discourse. Their dis-identifications with the modern lesbian came about in their discussions with each other. So did Edith and Frieda think of themselves as lesbian? Their correspondence suggests that Edith and Frieda did not. Yet Frieda and Edith did not entirely dismiss this cultural dialogue. In fact, as this chapter demonstrates, the two were engaged with debates and discussions about lesbianism. Faced with these modern cultural discourses and faced with the pragmatic experience of their feelings, Edith and Frieda described and defined their relationship to each other in a way that differed from, yet at the same time acknowledged, the larger cultural discourse. The implication was that the larger cultural discourse regarding the modern lesbian carried some degree of relevance for Edith and Frieda. They did not divorce these representations entirely. The relevance was that in science, in literature, and in theatre, women were talked about and portrayed as sensually and sexually involved with one another, largely to the exclusion of men. Edith and Frieda distilled this perception of the modern lesbian and applied it to their own experience in their engagement with the modern culture in which they lived.

What do Frieda’s and Edith’s strategies tell us about 1920s modernism? These strategies tell us that the technology and culture of modernism not only created a sense of disruption, but also offered the opportunity for repair. With respect to modern discourse regarding same-sex sexuality, gay men and lesbians employed modern ideas to reconstitute sexual subjectivity in a way that was compatible with their modern lives. For George Chauncey’s gay men of New York, the reconstitution of sexual subjectivity



meant the creation of urban spaces and a specific taxonomy that defined gay identities. Gay men countered negative stereotypical images of themselves by means of their associations with other gay men. In addition, Chauncey's men looked to the classical past in order to reframe their present; as Chauncey states, "imagining they had collective roots in the past, they asserted a collective identity in the present." By making the claim that historical figures such as Julius Caesar and Michelangelo were homosexual, gay men refuted the influential arguments that homosexuality was a form of sociological and biological degeneration.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to Chauncey's men of New York, Edith and Frieda looked not to a collective past, but to an imagined collective future, where biological/cultural evolution would affirm the logical and scientifically rational progression of women's intimate partnerships. In addition, finding themselves more isolated than their male counterparts in New York, Edith and Frieda affirmed their identities by mirroring each other in their continual letter-writing and recounted stories of other like-minded couples in their letters. Edith and Frieda employed the technologies of the modern postal service to its fullest in order to live as "devoted women."

As this chapter has demonstrated, the Fraser/Williams' correspondence was a product of modern technologies and modern culture, which in turn contoured Edith and Frieda's relationship. Their relationship as "devoted women" was shaped in the context of their correspondence. Edith and Frieda used the technologies and culture of 1920s modernism as means by which to construct a sexual subjectivity that could work for them

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<sup>70</sup> George Chauncey Jr., Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York: Basic), 286.

in the face of a modern culture that presented the lesbian in ways that did not reflect the reality of their intimacy. In this way, the two women did not divorce themselves from the modern culture that did not recognize their unique sexual subjectivity; Edith and Frieda were deeply engaged with the modern world in which they lived.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Doctors in Skirts: Profession and Passion**

This chapter examines the Fraser/Williams correspondence to explore the relationship between Frieda's training as a medical professional and her written passion for Edith. A close reading of the correspondence reveals that her devoted relationship with Edith aided Frieda's success in her professional training. The correspondence also suggests that Frieda's professional life contributed to the two women's intimate partnership.

Frieda's relationship with Edith aided her professional success in that she derived considerable emotional support from Edith. Frieda's belief that Edith loved her beyond all others proved invaluable. Frieda vented her professional frustrations to Edith and discussed her medical career options with Edith. Edith, an attentive listener, witnessed Frieda's professional challenges and validated her reactions to them.

Professionally and personally, Frieda involved Edith in her every waking moment. Frieda discussed, drew diagrams, explained, complained, and criticized, knowing that Edith read her letters carefully, listened closely, offered no censure, and was supremely admiring and interested. Frieda's exchanges with Edith connected her closely to someone outside the medical world, so that her correspondence with Edith was also an educational conduit. Frieda's explanations of medical information to Edith helped reinforce Frieda's medical expertise and strengthened her ability to discuss medical concepts in "lay person's" language. In addition, re-stating complex medical information

in simpler language and providing helpful small sketches highlighted Frieda's need to bring Edith up to her level of understanding. Frieda wanted Edith to know her deeply, both as a medical professional and as an intimate partner.

Frieda's passion for her profession was reflected in the passion she felt for Edith. As Frieda's medical life comprised so much of her sense of self, it was critical for her that Edith shared this part of her life. Frieda described her feelings about her professional life in detail while including Edith in the emotional experiences of her medical training. In terms of their future together, the prospect of Frieda's employment in the medical field offered the women the realistic possibility of a devoted intimate partnership without the need of external financial support. Edith's frank assumption of Frieda's success in medicine grounded their hopes for a long-term devoted intimate partnership.

Frieda's and Edith's intimate relationship was therefore deepened by Frieda's professional life. Frieda's professional success offered the women more potential freedom to have careers and a devoted relationship with another woman. As a result, Frieda did not feel the standard social pressure to quit her job upon marriage and Frieda could look forward to earning a living independent of male support. In addition, Frieda and Edith were aware of other same-sex intimate couples made up of medical professionals and this enabled them to see the possibilities in their own lives.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first locates Frieda in the medical world as a female medical student in relation to the larger community of women physicians in North America, in her decade, and in her graduating class. The second documents Frieda's experiences as an intern in New York. The third looks at Frieda's

experience as a medical resident in Philadelphia. From both locales, Frieda wrote about her experiences in ways that were infused with her longing for Edith. Her passion and her profession intertwined.

### **“Medettes and “Hen Medics””: Frieda’s Place in the Medical World**

The first half of the twentieth century was characterized by limited gains in the numbers of female physicians in North America. Even as female attendance at colleges and universities tripled and the numbers of female law students doubled, women’s enrollment in medical schools remained low. Factors that contributed to the stagnation included the disappearance of almost all women’s medical colleges, the availability of other health-related fields for educated women, the decline in the number of openings in medical schools, the increasing costs of a medical education, and in some cases the deliberate discrimination against women students by coeducational medical colleges.<sup>1</sup> Women’s medical colleges, faced with rapidly decreasing enrollment rates, by the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had either closed or merged with predominantly male institutions. The decreased enrollment was a result of the opening of male medical colleges to women, so that by the 1920s most medical schools in the United States and Canada admitted women. Nevertheless, male backlash and institutional discrimination were pervasive and affected women’s low representation in the decades that followed.

Indeed, the population of female medical students was not the only area of medical education affected by women’s low representation in male medical colleges.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen S. More, *Restoring the Balance: Women Physicians and the Profession of Medicine, 1850-1995* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 97.

Fewer medical teaching positions were available to women. The admission of women to coeducational medical schools contributed to the loss of largely female institutions that had been staffed by female medical professionals. Female medical colleges in Canada and the United States, after merging with larger universities, found themselves with no women on staff. Fewer female instructors led to fewer women enrolled in medical colleges and fewer internships made available to female medical graduates.

In the United States, for example, the demise of women's medical colleges and the minimal acceptance of women into coeducational medical schools had deleterious effects upon the percentages of women who were enrolled in medical colleges. Between 1899 and 1928 the number of women in regular medical colleges dropped from 5 percent of the total number of students in 1899 to 2.9 percent in 1910. By 1923, the figure rose to 6 percent and it leveled out at 4.6 percent in 1928, the year after Frieda graduated.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it took two decades for women to regain their earlier level of representation. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the number of female physicians, except during the Second World War, ranged between 4 and 6 percent in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

In Canada, the same trend occurred. With the last women's medical college in the country closing in 1906, women learned medicine at coeducational colleges in New Brunswick, Halifax, Kingston, and Toronto. Yet the number of female physicians in Canada remained low. In 1911, according to census reports, 2.7 percent (196) of physicians in Canada were women. This number decreased to 1.8 percent (152) in 1921,

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<sup>2</sup> Regina Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: women physicians in American medicine* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 249.

<sup>3</sup> Morantz-Sanchez, 314.

shortly before Frieda's enrollment in medical college. And while the census of 1931 records no relevant data, the 1941 census records that the number of women physicians rose to only 384 or 3.7 percent of all doctors in Canada.<sup>4</sup> When Frieda enrolled in medical college in Canada, the percentage of female physicians in Canada was at levels as low as or even lower than their American counterparts.

Frieda's medical training at the University of Toronto reflected these larger trends. In 1923, the University of Toronto medical college graduated 266 students and had 17 female graduates. In 1924, the class graduated 16 women out of 208 medical graduates. In 1925, Frieda's graduating class, the "Medettes" or "Hen Medics," as female medical students were called, numbered 9 out of 125. In 1926, the year after Frieda's graduating class, the class was larger at 184, but the number of female graduates numbered only 8.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of female-only medical institutions not only depleted Frieda's employment prospects, but also signaled a change in women's medical education. Frieda and the other eight women of her medical class did not have the benefit of learning medicine from women physicians who believed that female physicians, as women, had something special to bring to medicine.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Frieda and her female classmates were

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<sup>4</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, "Canada's Women Doctors: Feminism Constrained," in Linda Kealey, ed., A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 221. For scholarship on the history of women physicians in Canada, see Dianne Dodd and Deborah Gorham, ed., Caring and Curing: Historical Perspectives on Women and Healing in Canada (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994); Linda Kealey, ed., A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979). A comprehensive examination of the history of American female physicians is provided by Ellen S. More, Restoring the Balance: Women Physicians and the Profession of Medicine, 1850-1995 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Morantz-Sanchez, Sympathy and Science.

<sup>5</sup> Torontoensis: University of Toronto Yearbook 1925-1926, University of Toronto Archives, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Morantz-Sanchez, 88.

taught by male physicians and were expected to act and learn like their male colleagues. In medical college, Frieda and her female comrades had no role models of medical women who were supportive of each other; nor did they have opportunities to access a self-supporting or self-directed female medical community. Thus Frieda's correspondence to Edith was doubly important. Frieda needed to confide in Edith, particularly given the predominantly male atmosphere in which her medical education took place.

Nevertheless, as the correspondence suggests, Frieda, like her fellow female contemporaries, viewed any professional difficulties that she encountered as personal failings rather than as a product of systemic discrimination against women. Historian Regina Morantz-Sanchez writes:

More than ever, women physicians in the next decades would have to learn to maneuver autonomously in male world without either a reference group of other women or a coherent public ideology to give them support. Battles would continue to be fought, won, and lost, but they would be viewed as private battles, irrelevant to the female community at large, with the cost measured in primarily personal terms.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the predominantly male atmosphere of medical education brought attention to female medical graduates in ways that accentuated the feminine in a sexist manner, rather than in a way that privileged feminine qualities for the practice of medicine. The "Medettes" were praised for the beauty and elegance that they brought to the college. "And her classmates marvel that one small head can carry all she knows," was a comment that accompanied the photograph of one of Frieda's classmates.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Morantz-Sanchez, 311.

<sup>8</sup> Torontoensis, 147.



Frieda entered medical college just when medical requirements at the University of Toronto, as well as all other medical colleges, were becoming more difficult. Her class was the first to experience a six-year requirement, rather than five, under a new curriculum that reflected the efforts of all major medical colleges to increase professionalism in medical schools. New admission rules, which incorporated quotas on the number of women, held female medical students to a higher standard than their male counterparts. Prospective women applicants had fewer academic spaces available for which to compete. In addition, women generally had less time, less money, and less familial and social support than their male counterparts.

In many respects, Frieda was similar to the other women of her year. She was white, Anglo-Saxon, and middle class, and her family was steeped in higher education. Frieda's father, who died when Frieda was 15, had been Professor of French and German Languages at the University of Toronto. Frieda's older brother Donald, eight years her senior, also had graduated from the University of Toronto's Medical School. As her correspondence suggests, Frieda benefited from her brother's encouragement and his support.

Frieda's mother, Helene Fraser, also supported Frieda's choice of medicine as a career. A widow since 1915, Helene occasionally visited Frieda in New York and helped Frieda choose an apartment when she moved to Philadelphia to complete her residence. The correspondence suggests that Helene hoped that medical school would offer an opportunity for Frieda to meet and marry an eligible doctor, which was not uncommon

for female medical students. Helene also believed that a medical internship and residency would keep Frieda apart from Edith, which did not occur.

### **Internship at New York's Hospital for Women and Children**

“The demand for women doctors is as keen as that for a horse and buggy.”<sup>9</sup>

The year 1925, when Frieda began her internship in New York, was also one of the first years for Canadian female medical internships. Internships for female medical graduates were difficult to obtain, often requiring travel outside the country. That year, for example, saw the first woman to complete an internship and graduate within Canada.<sup>10</sup> Another early graduate, Dr. Margaret Owens, wrote in her autobiography that out of 266 medical graduates, including 17 women, at the University of Toronto in 1923, only two women were allowed to intern at Montreal General Hospital.<sup>11</sup> Given the dearth of hospitals that accepted women medical graduates as interns in Canada and the United States, Frieda was one of the fortunate.

Medical school marked just the beginning of professional tribulations for the female medical graduate. New female graduates could not generally rely on the support of their more successful sisters in the field. Successful female doctors were vocal about the fair treatment and opportunities they had experienced. Stressing female equality, these

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<sup>9</sup> Lillian Welch, 1927, cited by Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science*, 264.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Owens, in *Women Physicians of the World: autobiographies of medical pioneers*, ed. Leone McGregor Hellstedt (Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, 1978), 81.

doctors were adamant that women going into medicine not be granted “special treatment” because of their sex. Nevertheless, even though medical schools might have opened up their halls to women, many American Medical Association (AMA) approved hospitals refused to accept women as interns and residents. Seventeen states, for example, had no hospitals open to female interns. Consequently, positions for women faculty were limited.<sup>12</sup> Gender quotas, restricted placements, and low numbers of female medical faculty offered a limited occupational future for the female medical student.

Internships and residencies, which were necessary to obtain medical licenses, were withheld from women applicants on the grounds that young female graduates would be reluctant to sacrifice their personal lives for science. The idea of training as a specialist in private practice was even more remote, and successful role models of female general practitioners in private practice were rare. The most successful medical role models placed female physicians in institutional settings such as hospitals, women’s reformatories, and asylums. Frieda’s female contemporaries who did establish private general practice found themselves needing to combine their practice with hospital work. Discussing women physicians, historian Wendy Mitchinson notes:

Their teachers advised them not to apply for certain residencies because patients would not go to women specialists in private practice; others encountered physicians who refused to work with a woman doctor; still others were confronted by patients who preferred the authority of a male physician.<sup>13</sup>

Female medical graduates were not assured of an internship and residency. In Frieda’s class yearbooks, one female graduate was quoted as “talking of internships but we all

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<sup>12</sup> Morantz-Sanchez, 262.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchinson, 40.

wonder.” Another female doctor declared, “We know not what the future has in store.” These women likely hoped that their futures would include positions in medicine, but as these yearbook comments suggest, the likelihood of a woman’s success in the field of medicine was as doubtful as her success in obtaining a medical license. Ultimately, only six female graduates in Frieda’s class succeeded in completing internships and residencies and then obtaining Ontario medical licenses.

What happened to Frieda’s female classmates? A review of the records of Frieda’s graduating class from the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons reveals the situation for Toronto women medical graduates. From Frieda’s graduating class of 9 women out of 125 in total, 6 managed to obtain their medical licenses after internship and residency, and only one interned or did their residency in Ontario. Margaret B. Forster traveled and served as a missionary doctor in China. Grace Mills completed her residency at Galt Hospital, Ontario, and found employment as a physician at Eastern Shore State Hospital in Cambridge, Maryland. Dr. Jean Purcell practiced at Patterson State Hospital in California; Mary Anna Nicholson interned in Northampton, Massachusetts, and lived and practiced medicine on the frontier in Saskatchewan. Minnie Steinhauer (nee Singer) received her license in 1928 after an internship in Jackson, Michigan. She did not renew her Ontario license. Of these female graduates, only Frieda Fraser regularly renewed her Ontario license. In May 1968, she was awarded a lifetime membership in the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons because she had been a member in good standing for more than 25 years. She was over seventy years old.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, *Physician Directories, 1883-1953*, Toronto.

The implications of limitations in residencies for female physicians in Ontario were telling. By severely restricting residencies for women, Ontario lost good physicians for their lifetimes of practice. Most female physicians who completed their internships and residencies outside Ontario remained outside the province for the full extent of their medical careers. Grace Mills, the one woman of Frieda's class who completed her residency at Galt Hospital, worked briefly in public health for the city of Galt. Dr. Mills ultimately found more challenging employment in the United States, where she was able to make full use of the medical knowledge she had acquired in Ontario. Not one woman of Frieda's graduating medical class practiced general medicine in Ontario.

Frieda, like many of her female medical peers, continued her training in the United States, where she worked at New York's Hospital for Women and Children in gynaecology and obstetrics. Indeed, gynaecology, obstetrics, public health, social hygiene, and preventative medicine were areas of the health sciences in which women physicians often found themselves. Margaret Owens, two years Frieda's senior at the University of Toronto and one of two women granted an internship at Montreal General, was the first woman to be accepted at the Royal Victoria Hospital. At the Royal Victoria, she worked in gynaecology and obstetrics. Like Frieda, Owens later continued her residency in Philadelphia in disease pathology. Despite her aptitude and interest in disease pathology, she ultimately found employment in Alberta's public health department.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Owens, 81.

We do not know how Frieda came to intern at New York's Hospital for Women and Children, but as Frieda noted, her choices of internships were limited to "children (tonsillectomies) and obstetrics."<sup>16</sup> Frieda's internship at New York's Hospital for Women and Children began in 1924. Her correspondence began from the hospital in 1925 and continued from New York until the hospital closed. Noting that her shifts were long and filled with activity, Frieda's correspondence suggests that there were never enough hours in the day. Nevertheless, Frieda read and reread Edith's letters in free moments at the hospital and wrote brief sentences while sitting for a few minutes on breaks. Frieda's relationship with Edith was a source of strength and moral support during these trying years.

Because the hospital served a largely immigrant population, Frieda's letters highlighted her professional exchanges with a diverse population of New Yorkers. Frieda's internship incorporated visiting tenement homes in the Lower East Side. She described one of her house calls:

If you don't mind noise and dirt the conditions really aren't bad. It came over me this afternoon as I was pausing to take air on the fifth flight and admiring a really beautiful starshaped break in a window that I could be overwhelmingly happy with you in just such a place. There is something I am pining to tell you I don't know at all what, except that it is nice and just around the corner--rather like sunshine through a window.<sup>17</sup>

Frieda's letters were as much a description of her love of medicine as they were a description of her love for Edith. In a poetic moment, while she was working, Frieda recalled the joy she felt when she was with Edith. The broken glass in a window pane

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<sup>16</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>17</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 7 February 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

became a star, and the bright light that flooded the darkness of the stairwell caused Frieda to reflect on the strength of her passions for Edith. How did Edith listen to Frieda's passion?

Edith responded to Frieda's letters as frequently as Frieda wrote them. She maintained her connection with Frieda by writing about people they both knew. This included members of their families and their mutual friends. Edith wrote about her plans to visit Frieda in New York and her plans to have Frieda come to London. She wrote that she might find a job close to Frieda or that Frieda might choose a job in a place that was easily accessible to Edith. She also wrote about how she read Frieda's letters and the places where she kept them safe, often close to her body. On one occasion, Edith told Frieda that she planned to attend a lecture given by psychoanalyst Alfred Adler, because she knew that Frieda was an enthusiast of his work. She did this in spite of the fact that the lecture was in German and Edith, unlike Frieda, did not understand the language. On another occasion, paying attention to Frieda's professional expertise, Edith asked Frieda's advice about an herb, writing, "A little medical advice please I would like to know what "penny royale is and what it is used for."<sup>18</sup> Thus the correspondence suggests that while Edith might not have directly addressed Frieda's hospital experiences, she responded to the passions that underlay Frieda's professional pursuits.

Thus Edith answered Frieda's professional comments by maintaining her emotional connection to Frieda. For example, when Frieda wrote about her experiences in

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<sup>18</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 4 April 1927, File 08, Box 010, FFPR. Penny royale was regarded and used as an abortifacient, but the correspondence does not reveal why Edith asked this question. Nor did Frieda answer the question in writing.

New York tenements, Edith replied, “My darling, I’m being more feeble-minded than ever about thinking about you. I don’t seem to be able to give my whole attention to anything comfortably.”<sup>19</sup> At the time Frieda wrote to Edith about her obstetrics patients in a July New York heat wave, Edith was in Toronto visiting her family and attempting to organize her time around a visit to Frieda in New York.

Indeed, making herself available to Frieda, whether by correspondence, by arranging short visits, or by telephone, was a way in which Edith indicated her constant listening presence to Frieda. That same month, July 1926, Edith connected to Frieda by telephone. Writing about her phone call, Edith wrote, “My darling, I loved your voice last night. It was the nicest thing to have you to telephone. Oh my lamb, I want you so and it hurts me so not to be able to see you.”<sup>20</sup> Even then, however, Edith wrote to Frieda regarding her difficulties in telephoning. With her family in earshot, Edith’s freedom of conversation was curtailed. In addition, Edith feared her family’s disapproval of her frequent calls. Edith wrote:

I nearly telephoned you tonight, but they couldn’t get you at once and then the family came in, which spoilt it all. I can’t talk to you with them about very happily and they would think I was an awful fool especially after you had telephoned me just two days ago.<sup>21</sup>

This letter signals that Edith needed to connect to Frieda “happily,” meaning unencumbered by the presence of family members. When communicating “happily” with Frieda, Edith listened in a way that afforded her full attention without distraction.

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<sup>19</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 February 1926, File 05, Box 10, FFPR.

<sup>20</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 July 1926, File 05, Box 10, FFPR.

<sup>21</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 July 1926, File 05, Box 10, FFPR.



In turn, Frieda imbued her workplace with Edith's passionate presence. As Frieda received Edith's letters at the hospital, their frequency was noticed by Frieda's co-workers—a situation that Frieda related to Edith. Edith responded by noting, "Burnsey's remarks about your letters from me had me to think I may be compromising you – would you like me to have them addressed by someone else? Or just put them once a week in a large envelope?" Edith, however, offered a professional solution to the numbers of handwritten letters Frieda received at the hospital. Edith began addressing her envelopes on her typewriter from her job at the Ontario tourism office in England. Edith used her job to safeguard Frieda's professional status by typing the letters' envelopes, which Edith described as putting the hospital "off the scent." Edith wrote:

I'm sorry I can't type my envelopes now, or at least some of them to put the hospital off the scent, if any one is interested. You'll just have to be compromised because I'll expire if I can't write to you every time I am took badly. Isn't it the nicest thing that we like each other? I just mention it for fear that you might not have noticed it! I love you dear.<sup>22</sup>

Edith's remarks to Frieda regarding the numbers of letters that arrived at the hospital indicate that, despite her choice to receive her letters at the hospital, Frieda wanted to keep the intimate relationship private.

Writing to Edith afforded Frieda the opportunity to share her experiences of working in the tenements of New York. These are evidenced in another letter in which Frieda wrote:

The East side is quite fascinating in some way - The tenements I visit are practically all alike in general principle and rather hard to tell apart if you have traveled up the stairs of six or eight a day - you get a composite picture of them - very likely English seems to be spoken and the shops have all sorts of words in

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<sup>22</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, June 1926, File 04, Box 10, FFPR.

the windows English and foreign mixed Russki I Polski Silicciera, Pecke, and what not, cheek by jowl.<sup>23</sup>

The apartments looked alike to Frieda. And she was distanced from the community in terms of language. Frieda conveyed little concern over her own safety, though she was aware that others were uneasy about these visits. Notably, she did not mention that she might possibly be at greater risk because she was female, writing,

Yesterday I trotted along C and 11<sup>th</sup> St. without a qualm though it was dark and of course I wasn't spoken to. I never have been in those parts— People are uneasy about going there even in broad daylight if they aren't familiar with it. I suppose there is a lot in looking as though you had business there. When I am diving into some black doorway and often hear people say behind me, "Who's that?"<sup>24</sup>

Frieda's correspondence suggests that she took security in her position both in society and as a physician. And she needed to let Edith know this as well. Frieda trusted in her perception that her profession commanded a particular respect, even though she acknowledged other people's fears in travelling to this part of the city. Her safety, she reasoned, rested in "looking as though one had business there." Frieda seemed unafraid because she represented the medical community.

Frieda's sense of security was derived from her professional duties and her professional attire. Indeed the professional uniform was a source of personal safety, a sign of authority, and a reminder of class position for many women. Kathryn McPherson, in writing about nurses' uniforms, notes that, "like religious habits, nurses' uniforms signified the desexualized status of the women wearing them, simultaneously containing female sexuality even as the bodies wearing the uniform learned about the human

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<sup>23</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 15 February 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

body.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Frieda’s long overcoat coat and her medical bag enabled her to function more freely in public. The difference, however, is that McPherson acknowledges professionalism and the *containment* of feminine sexuality because of the nurse’s uniform, whereas in Frieda’s situation, any feminine sexuality that might have been implied by her attire was almost erased. On the streets of New York’s tenement district, Frieda, a tall thin figure wearing a fedora, or cap, and a long coat and carrying a black doctor’s bag, would have appeared almost completely male.

Frieda shared her sense of disconnection from her patients with Edith. The Lower East Side community that Frieda served as an intern did not know who Frieda was and Frieda did not know this community. Her letters acknowledged this social distance:

The most exciting thing is when you stop in to see a patient and find the house absolutely jammed with people shouting and gesticulating and you can’t tell from their voices whether they are having a hate about the way the child is being treated or whether they are having a good time. Then one of them addresses you in not broken but pulverized English and you begin to get the drift of the situation. When you find they have called in another doctor I must say it becomes ticklish.<sup>26</sup>

Frieda had great difficulty understanding her clients. This passage suggests that she blamed them (or how they lived) for her lack of comprehension, stressing the crowded rooms and people shouting and waving their arms. Her only understanding, she remarked, was that her house call had something to do with the child. Frieda’s lack of recognition of her clients was emphasized by her description of her patients not even in gendered terms, but as “one of them.” Frieda’s distance was further highlighted by the fact that they called in yet another doctor (for what reasons we do not know). Frieda described the situation as

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<sup>25</sup> Kathryn McPherson, “The Case of the Kissing Nurse” in Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy Forestall, eds., *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays on Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 182.

<sup>26</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 18 February 1926, File 07, Box 036, FFPR.

“ticklish” and once more minimized the urgency expressed by her clients. Nevertheless, Frieda told Edith that her clients called in another doctor, signaling either that her clients were in some way disappointed with Frieda, perhaps because she was a woman, or that they were so afraid that no doctor would show up that they called for another doctor before the first one arrived.

What do Frieda’s descriptions of her professional world tell us about the way in which Edith listened? Edith stayed close to Frieda and allowed Frieda to make sense of her development as medical practitioner. Edith’s constant presence, whether by correspondence, by telephone, or in person, turned her into the person to whom Frieda related narratives of her medical experience. Edith was the trusted other to whom Frieda recounted her likes and dislikes and her connections and disconnections with the varied arenas of her medical education.

Edith also read about Frieda’s written frustrations in the course of her internship. This was evident in Frieda’s references to crowded apartment buildings. Frieda’s reference to the tenement home as “absolutely jammed with people” is significant in the context of public health physicians’ connections to racism and eugenics in the 1920s. Morantz-Sanchez writes that many female physicians, upon completing residencies in institutions or reformatories, developed ideas about heredity and came to support a growing eugenics movement. Furthermore, many physicians in the areas of public health were inspired by a social Darwinism that emphasized easy access to birth control, particularly for immigrant populations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Morantz-Sanchez, p. 290.

Birth control in fact was a subject that frustrated Frieda. She sympathized with her patients' attempts to limit their families, writing, "Most of my clients have one complaint against fate, and that is too many children. It is dreadfully unfair."<sup>28</sup> In noting these sympathies towards her patients, Frieda was not alone. Many female physicians wrote letters to birth control advocate Marie Stopes deploring their own medical education with respect to birth control. Like Frieda, these doctors emphasized the misery that was brought upon their patients as a result of the absence of control over motherhood.<sup>29</sup> Historian Angus McLaren notes that despite legal restrictions on birth control in Canada, women employed whatever means they could. Family size in all segments of Canadian society declined after World War I and most middle-class Canadians of the 1920s were aware of the propagandizing efforts in favour of contraception carried out by British birth control advocate Marie Stopes and American Margaret Sanger.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Frieda mentioned contraception and Stopes in one of her letters:

After dashing back yesterday I went to tea at Gertrude's Gardens and found myself suddenly in a rare intellectual atmosphere. I was immediately introduced to and set down beside an active middle aged woman with an air whose opening remark was "Tell me about the contraceptive clinics in Toronto." The appropriate reply would have been "There is no Scopes [Stopes]," but in effect mine was the same.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 19 February 1926, File 07, Box 36, FFPR.

<sup>26</sup> Lesley A. Hall, "A Suitable Job for A Woman: Women Doctors and Birth Control to the Inception of the NHS," in *Women and Modern Medicine*, ed. Ann Hardy and Conrad Lawrence (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V. The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, 2001), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and The State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880-1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 72.

<sup>31</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 7 February 1926, File 07, Box 36, FFPR.

Frieda shared with Edith her experience of connection with other women who used her as a source of information regarding contraceptive clinics in Toronto, but she also turned to Edith as a source of information on contraception in England:

Do you happen to know the present state of birth control in England? Are there any contraceptive clinics or have they been shut up? For some reason information is damn difficult to come by probably due to the anomalous state of the law and public opinion.<sup>32</sup>

This letter demonstrates that Frieda found herself seeking information from sources outside her medical world. A short time later, she wrote:

Lewis [one of the senior doctors at Bellevue] remarked one day that all the information about contraception she had ever got was from laymen and she has been practicing about 30 years. I think almost anyone would say the same.<sup>33</sup>

Her letters also reveal how other physicians sought out their birth control information. At one point Frieda wrote:

There was a swell discussion at a staff meeting here about birth control. Did I tell you? I felt awfully ignorant. I didn't seem to know the first thing about whatever- Dr. Baldwin the president of course takes the ancient view that every child is the blessing of god, etc., up to 70X7 but there are others almost as old who don't share her views: altogether it was most entertaining. One of Ada's friends, a medical man states that every woman ought to be able to have a baby by the time she's thirty and no damn questions asked- Isn't that nice?<sup>34</sup>

Frieda letter reflected her openness with Edith about her professional life and reveals the ways in which Frieda and other female physicians dealt with the issue as a group. Noting a similar situation in 1920s London, historian Lesley Hall writes that "medical women as a group seem to have been more prepared to ventilate the subject and to endeavour to thrash out a collective attitude."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

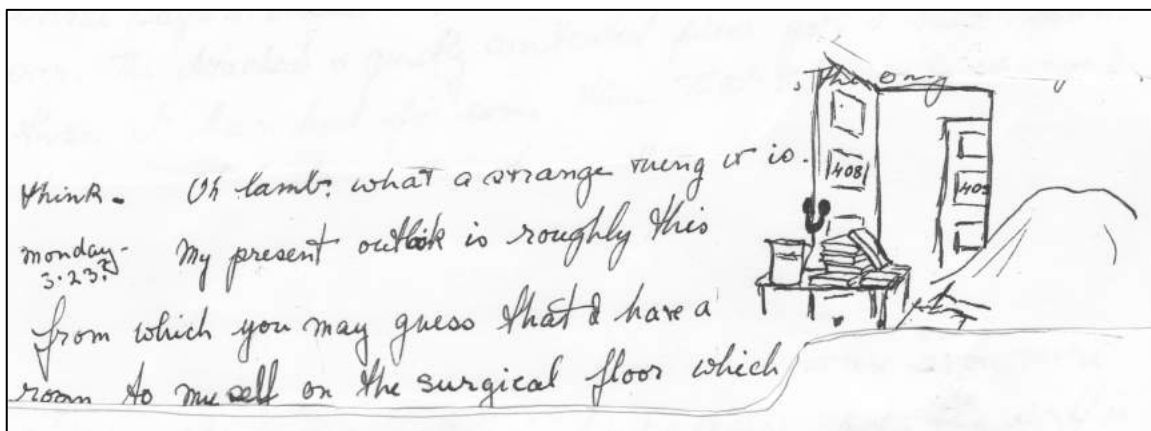
<sup>33</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 19 February 1926, File 07, Box 36, FFPR

<sup>34</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, June 1925, File 08, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, 138.

The above letter suggests that Frieda, as a young intern, viewed ideas about birth control as indicators of youth and modernity. She used her president, who was older, as an example of someone who was “old fashioned” and therefore not an advocate of effective birth control. She was surprised, then, when she learned that there were other doctors in her midst who were even older who were advocates of effective birth control. This seems to have shaken Frieda’s perception of birth control advocacy as a reflection of the age of the medical practitioner. She needed to tell Edith that there was a medical *man*, not present at the group, who believed that every woman, married or not, should be able to have a baby. At the same time, she was critical, perhaps in part on personal grounds, of another medical man’s notion that every woman should have a child by age 30.

Medical issues often brought doctores and interns together as a group, but as Frieda’s letters and sketches indicate, Frieda often felt very alone in her medical training. In the following ink drawing, Frieda shared her experience of her internship in a visual way. Here Frieda invited Edith into Frieda’s dormitory room at the hospital:



Dated 23 March 1926 when Frieda had been an intern for almost a year and a half, the caption besides the sketch read, “My present outlook is roughly this from which you may guess that I have a room to myself on the surgical floor.”<sup>36</sup> The sketch presumably depicts Frieda’s perspective from her desk or from her bed. She drew from where she sat, looking outward and thereby portraying her room as messy and empty. Textbooks are haphazardly stacked next to a liquid filled jug near the edge of the small square table. The door, numbered 408, is propped open to reveal another room, across the hall. A stethoscope hangs on the doorknob. A large lump, which might be clothes, lies underneath what might be a blanket or a sheet.

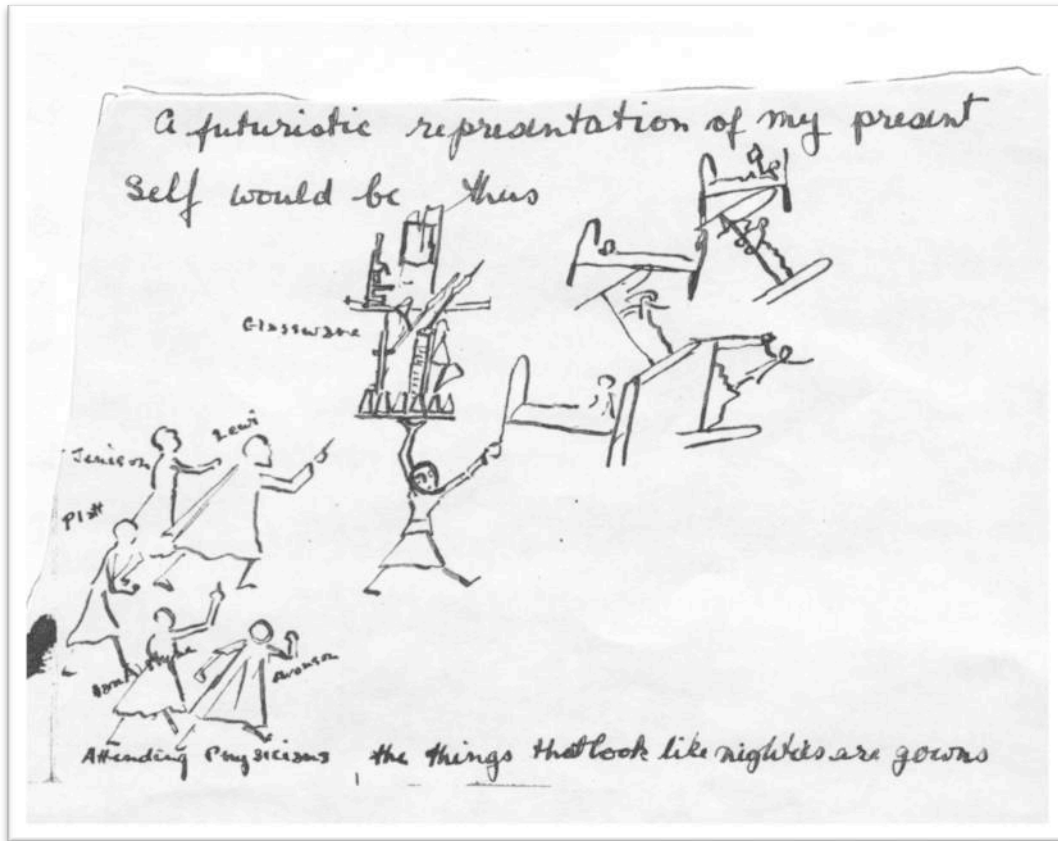
The little sketch of Frieda’s tiny room was different from her other renderings as will become evident. Frieda did not draw herself in the sketch; this was rather a drawing “through her eyes.” In addition, Frieda employed more of a “still-life” sensibility rather

<sup>36</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 23 March 1926, File 07, Box 36, FFPR.



than illustrating an action. I believe that this sketch carried a particularly personal message, because of the fact that the drawing was rendered from a personal vantage point. I suggest Frieda wanted Edith to see exactly what she (Frieda) saw and felt, so that Edith could share her perspective on her life as an intern. Presumably Frieda was inside, looking out her open door. Frieda's open door, however, reveals a closed door across the hall. Frieda's depiction of her door as open suggests that she wants Edith to come inside. However, Frieda's simultaneous rendering of the door across the hall is also telling. That door is closed. Edith is across the Atlantic, and Frieda is in the process of finding the right words to describe her feelings to Edith at a time when these words constitute an indictment. Perhaps Frieda felt at this point distanced from her colleagues and perhaps she felt that Edith was closed to her as well. Nevertheless, Frieda's loneliness is palpable.

An ink sketch by Frieda depicts herself in a balancing act in the presence of her attending physicians. Frieda's caption to her sketch explained, "A futuristic representation of my present self would be thus." Beneath the drawing Frieda wrote, "Attending Physicians, the things that look like nighties are gowns." The drawing, as indicated by Frieda's caption, suggests an inspiration by contemporary art movements, as well as Frieda's sense of her own impending time constraints. The angular positions, the directionality of the hospitals beds, and the corresponding angular motions of the attending physicians' bodies imply that Frieda experienced ever-increasing pressures and complications, always under critical eyes.



In this drawing Frieda is in the centre, facing outward, wearing the short coat of an intern. The higher-ranking doctors are in long gowns, “looking like nighties.” Each physician is named: Jamison, Lewis, Platt, and Swanson. Frieda’s hands are full with patients in her left and medical instruments of health science in her right. Frieda’s left hand supports her patients in their individual beds, all in different states of recovery. Frieda has drawn one patient falling out of bed, another appears to be requesting help, another is sitting up, another patient is lying flat, and another is getting up. In a pictorial manner, Frieda imparted to Edith her experience of the kinds of pressures that she was under as an intern in the hospital, depicting her experience as overwhelming. She has portrayed herself as

alone in her efforts to care for each patient alongside her efforts to balance the glassware of medical science that was the basis for their recovery.

In Frieda's right hand, the scientific glassware includes flasks, beakers, pipettes, a microscope, and tall, calibrated medical containers that threatened to crash at any moment. Frieda has drawn herself wide-eyed and stick-like and her hair is short. The attending physicians in the picture are not merely watching her frantic medical work; they are pointing, instructing, criticizing. They are demanding--and her patients and glassware are on the verge of collapse. It appears that Frieda's patient care was threatening to fall apart, a situation occasionally confirmed in her letters.

Frieda seemed both collapsed and relaxed in another picture she drew for Edith. The captioned explained,

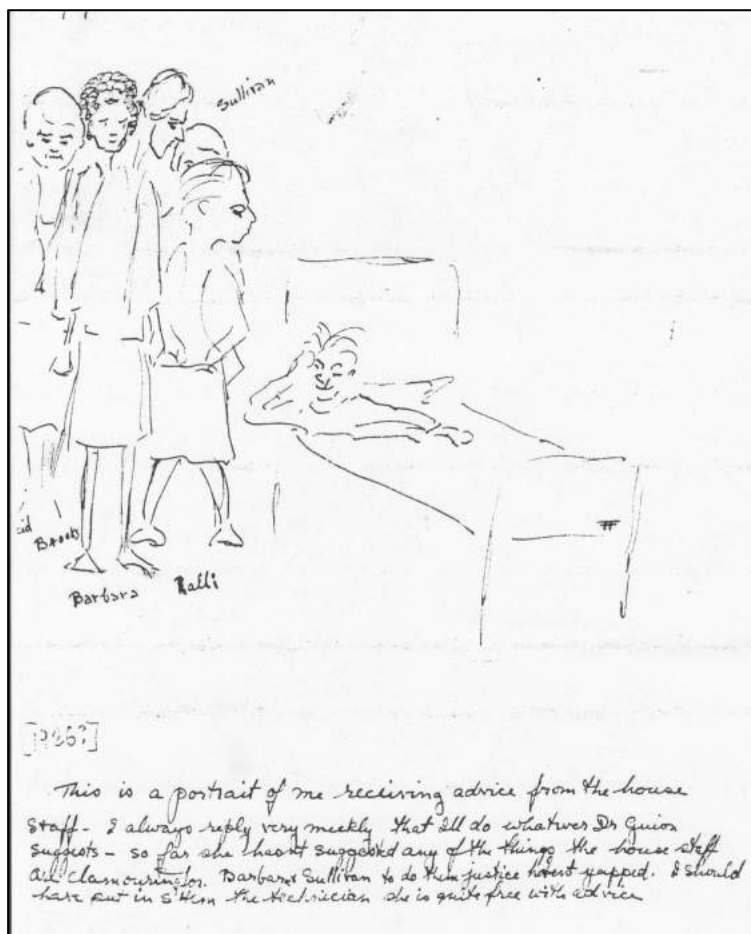
This is a portrait of me receiving information from the house staff, I always reply very meekly that I do whatever Dr. Guion suggests. So far she hasn't suggested any of the things the house staff are clamouring for. Barbara and Sullivan to do them justice haven't yapped. I should have put in Suttern the technician, she is quite free with advice.<sup>37</sup>

In this caption, Frieda has explained how she was feeling pressure by her superiors.

Frieda's emotional state was also evidenced in the following self-portrait.

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<sup>37</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. June 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.



She depicted herself reclining in a hospital bed, as if on display but also relaxed. She is surrounded by the house staff, rendered as imposing figures who stand over her. By this time, Frieda had been at the hospital for one year.<sup>38</sup> Frieda is confident and smug in this sketch. Her body is propped up by her right arm and she is simultaneously listening to the staff and gazing out of the frame. Frieda's sketch suggested that she listened to the hospital world, but looked out to Edith for support.

Frieda also expressed her frustrations with her patients in written form. In the power struggle that often ensued between patient demands and doctor's advice, neither

<sup>38</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, n.d. July 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

patient nor doctor had full control. In this context, Frieda's letters regarding patient-doctor relationships in 1920s Lower East Side New York suggest that patients by no means relinquished available health choices in exchange for doctor-supervised health care.

In one instance, Frieda's patient blamed her for having to have a baby and demanded more pain relief. Frieda was "dripping ether for four tonsillectomies" while taking care of her labouring patient:

While I cajoled this miserable Hebrew into having a baby to the tune of "it's all your fault doctor, that I have the baby", "O my legs, I can no more, I die, I die" "please give me some ether-she also offered to get off the table and go home because we wouldn't help her And more that was even less reasonable. The Jews don't show up well under those conditions and eclamptic toxemias and semitic blood are enough to send you out of your mind.<sup>39</sup>

Frieda's letters brought Edith to the bedside of her patients. Historian Wendy Mitchenson acknowledges that because of privacy regulations, medical patient records often get destroyed or are very difficult to access so that very little is known about patient-doctor relationships before 1939. Most Canadian sources that recount doctor-patient relationships before 1939 are available in the form of diaries, memoirs and letters and highlight fond memories of medical acts of kindness in stories of physicians who lowered their fees or bought groceries for starving families with newborns.<sup>40</sup>

Edith was an ear for Frieda to frankly describe her patient. She described her labouring patient as blaming Frieda for her baby, perhaps because of ineffective birth

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<sup>39</sup>Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 6 January 1926, File 9, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>40</sup>Wendy Mitchinson, *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 35.

control information or lack of access to a safe abortion; perhaps because the patient went into premature labour and blamed the onset on poor hospital care. Frieda quoted her patient, saying that she demanded more pain relief and threatened to leave if she didn't get it. Frieda shared her anger toward her patient with Edith. She also referred to her in racist terms as a "miserable Hebrew" with "semitic blood."

As evidenced in these letters, Frieda and her colleagues came from class and cultural backgrounds that were different from those of the Lower East Side patients who they served. Early 20th century medicine was heavily influenced by eugenic theories and social Darwinism. Racist medical notions were often expressed at the level of patient care. Frieda's anti-Semitic references linked a serious medical situation with medical misinformation about blood type.<sup>41</sup> The reference to human blood as Semitic reflected a scientifically-based racism that was pervasive in professional medical education in this period.

Differences in communities and cultures were noted by Frieda to Edith in other letters as well. In one, Frieda brought Edith into a ward where foreign cultural traditions clashed with modern, middle-class white obstetrics. Frieda described her patient as a "huge Italian woman" and then explained,

At the moment I'm hanging about keeping a professional eye on a huge Italian woman worthy of the subject of the story which culminates in, "and the goat fainted". Her mother told her she mustn't bath during the time she was about to have her baby. She came last week to the clinic and I made a noble stand against the mother's advice but found today it had been blissfully ignored. She says her first child weighed 17 lbs. And the last 15 but "but thank you God I never have

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<sup>41</sup> Frieda's indication of *eclamptic toxemia* was a life-threatening convulsion brought on by high blood pressure during pregnancy.

any trouble. The last time the middle wife just got to the door.” I shall certainly thank God when this one is put away.<sup>42</sup>

In this letter, Frieda described an Italian pregnant woman (likely with gestational diabetes) who heeded her mother’s advice regarding health and pregnancy instead of Frieda’s science. The woman’s mother had advised the woman to not bathe just before giving birth, perhaps out of cultural traditions. And maintaining cultural traditions the woman had also used a midwife for her two previous births. Why did the woman access the hospital to have her third baby?

Frieda’s remarks suggest a moment when women, even with good birthing histories and the use of midwives and still following their mother’s traditional advice, still opted for doctor-supervised hospitals. Frieda’s comments acknowledged that pain relief was often a factor, but a few days away from a crowded tenement was also a likely motivation. The hospital ward was something of a respite for both Frieda and her patients, despite the relatively uncomfortable conditions. In another letter, Frieda referred to a patient’s husband “barging in,” an indication that Frieda’s obstetrics ward was ordinarily a place of comfort, even as the women lay almost naked in a crowded ward in a July heat wave:

It was funny walking into the ward tonight, I switched on the light and wherever I went there were rows of women lying with their limbs exposed up to the chest. A very trying sight. The O.B. patients aforementioned spent the entire afternoon without a stitch on. Which was awkward because the husband of one kept barging in on the other party and everyone was frantically trying to head off the expose that ultimately occurred.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, January 1926, File 9, Box 36, FFPR.

<sup>43</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 11 July 1926, FFPR.

This suggests that Frieda enjoyed and derived a sense of accomplishment from her work in the hospital. In the next excerpt, Frieda displayed a sense of comfort in the ward. Like a seasoned doctor, she had become practiced enough to notice patterns and make predictions:

It looks as though we were going to have a thunderstorm, in which case the obstetrical patients will flock in like chickens at sundown (we had seven in one night in as many hours).<sup>44</sup>

In another vignette, Frieda depicted herself again as an experienced physician who was acquainted with multiple patient needs, in addition to the needs of her fellow interns:

No sooner does the night shift come on than the fun begins. Kitridge [another female intern] called me up to see a patient who wasn't delivering and I thought Finley [the attending] ought to be called and had the forceps boiled. We could get neither attending meanwhile I had to scrub and deliver another patient. While I was doing it Kitridge's delivered with the baby black in the face the cord around its neck twice one arm up and not breathing.<sup>45</sup>

Here Frieda was conscious not only of her own patients, but of her colleague's patients as well. Now more seasoned, Frieda described herself as the person who decided whether or not to call the attending for help. Using the words "you can imagine" Frieda wrote that she imagined Edith imagining her handling crises at the hospital:

You can imagine how I danced from one delivery room to the other. The nurses were beside themselves because they don't like Kit much as an obstetrician; however the baby came round pretty easily. Then my woman refused to deliver the placenta and we eventually had Finlay down and everything set up to go after it...In the intervals I kept bobbing in and out to look after a new baby that had shot a temp of 103, a lunie on my floor, the med-ward rounds, children's ward, all the surg pts., and there are some quite sick ones .<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, June 1926, File 10, Box 36, FFPR.

<sup>45</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, June 1926, File 10, Box 36, FFPR.

<sup>46</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, June 1926, File 10, Box 36, FFPR.



Even though the nurses and physicians at New York's Hospital for Women and Children were all female, Frieda's correspondence to Edith suggests that there existed little camaraderie on the basis of shared gender; the barriers of medical hierarchy proved stronger. Frieda seldom made references to nurses in her correspondence, and there was only one instance in which she identified the nurse by name. This passage, however, suggests that though nurses' opinions counted, Frieda nevertheless referred to them collectively and impersonally.

Frieda's letters to Edith indicate that she connected with some of her patients. In one instance, Frieda expressed concern and relief that her patient, Mrs. Boris, had had a nephrectomy. She wrote, "Mrs. Boris finally had a nephrectomy (surgical removal of the kidney), thank god."<sup>47</sup> The word *finally* implied that Frieda had knowledge of Mrs. Boris's ongoing condition and "thank god" is the only place in the entire correspondence where Frieda articulated such relief. Having taken the time and energy to let Edith know about Mrs. Boris, Frieda indicated her connection to her patient and her patient's healthcare. Her correspondence suggests that, as a patient, Mrs. Boris was special. She referred to her by name and this patient-doctor relationship was not characterized by frustrations and demands. Frieda's frustration in this case was with the hospital:

But they threw back the ureter without tying it off - this by a specialist from outside - any fool medical student or anyone at all would know better - apparently they just forgot - Knowlton assisted and was afraid to say anything believing that the man knew what he was about...It is amazing that she didn't die.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>48</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

Frieda acknowledged significant factors that contributed to her frustration. The first issue was the surgeon's negligence. The second was the deference accorded to the surgeon by interns, even in the face of a grievous error. Frieda did not account for the surgeon, except to say that he was a specialist from the outside and that it was amazing that Mrs. Boris did not die. However, Frieda compassionately suggested that Knowlton, her fellow intern, was afraid to say anything and believed that the surgeon knew what he was doing. Nevertheless, Frieda indicated her anger by stating that "any fool medical student would know better." Frieda noted that "they" threw back the ureter and "anyone at all" would know better; the implication was that all who were present at the operation were aware of the error and said nothing.

Despite her concern for Mrs. Boris, Frieda confided to Edith that she did not necessarily want to become the kind of medical practitioner who attended to her patient's social welfare. In one letter, Frieda described her conflicted position in enjoying medicine and people but finding satisfaction in disease research:

God deliver me from the practice of medicine. I like the traffic with people a lot - And I like the study of disease—But I don't seem to be able to get them both harnessed to the cart and pulling in the same direction. For instance, I could examine a patient most carefully and follow the course of his disease with the greatest of interest but it would not occur to me to do anything to stop it - and I wouldn't like to treat him because it might mask the pathological picture - you can't practice medicine that way.<sup>49</sup>

This letter highlighted her interest in the examination of disease and its progression, rather than curing the disease in people's bodies. Frieda's conflicted position was still

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<sup>49</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

evident in a letter written in February 1927 in which she returned to the New York Hospital for Women and Children for a weekend visit from Philadelphia. Frieda wrote:

This morning was quite like old times, Mrs. Boris and Miss Hund were in the ward again poor devils. Mrs. Boris is the one whose history I gave you so fully the day you arrived. With a few blood counts on Saturday and filling out chart cards today I felt that it only lacked a delivery to make me feel thoroughly in place again, the hospital is full to overflowing. When I'm there it makes me kinda sick to think that I probably will never practice.<sup>50</sup>

Frieda already sensed that she might not be able to practice medicine in the future. Her bittersweet acknowledgement reveals that she already had made her choice to pursue medical research. Frieda began her internship in January of 1927 at the Phipps' Institute in Philadelphia where she specialized in bacteriology.

During the last weeks of 1926, between her residency in New York and her internship in Philadelphia Frieda returned to Toronto for a brief stay with her mother and her brother Donald. In late December 1926, Frieda had not had any letters from Edith for probably a week. Edith was in transit paying Christmas visits to her aunts and then spending Christmas with Mollie Calder and her family in Saltfleet. At this point, having not heard from Edith, Frieda wryly described her waiting for Edith's letters in medical terminology:

My dear,  
The most probable reasons for you not writing are in order:  
Accident  
Amnesia  
Appendicitis  
Bubonic Plague  
Diphtheria  
Encephalitis

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<sup>50</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 6 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

Failure to Forward Mail  
 Meningitis  
 Pneumonia  
 Poisoning on Purpose  
 Scarlet Fever  
 Ventricular Fibulation due to Chloroform  
 Even then some of them wouldn't last as long as this.<sup>51</sup>

This demonstrated that Frieda's longing for word from Edith was inextricable from her connection to medicine. The fact that Frieda received her mail where she worked made that connection all the more concrete.

Frieda's correspondence from Philadelphia and the latter half of 1927 suggests that Frieda had relaxed regarding her personal and professional relationships. It was clear that in Philadelphia those who were connected with Frieda became quickly acquainted with her mail as well. Frieda wrote from Philadelphia, "My Lamb - You spoil me terribly. When I got back to the lab there were several letters from you there - what Miss Westerman calls 'important mail' without cracking a smile and a most exciting parcel."<sup>52</sup> That Miss Westerman referred to mail from Edith as important was valuable to Frieda. Frieda noted also that Miss Westerman did not "crack a smile." Frieda's personal relationship was validated by someone from her professional world at the site where the professional and the personal connected—the mailroom.

Notably, the Phipps Institute in Philadelphia, where Frieda continued her residency, was one of the world's foremost institutions for the study and treatment of tuberculosis. During this decade, investigators at the Phipps Institute discovered that a

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<sup>51</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 7 January 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>52</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 18 January 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

patient could have TB and be non-symptomatic. Newly developed x-ray technologies were the only method of diagnosing the disease in the absence of symptoms. Frieda spent her days taking and analyzing x-rays, attending lung surgeries, preparing cultures, and investigating the processes of notorious lung and blood diseases.

Frieda's correspondence to Edith from this time acknowledged a number of differences between her training experiences in New York and Philadelphia. In New York, Frieda lived at the hospital, while in Philadelphia she rented a flat and took public transportation to the Phipps. In New York, Frieda's hospital was a predominantly female institution, Frieda was always recognized as a doctor, and she treated large numbers of patients. Phipps was coeducational and the differences in the clinical training that Frieda experienced at the Phipps were immediate. Frieda found herself having to struggle to get client experience:

Today, for instance one of my patients came in for an x-ray and the nurse asked if I would see her in the clinic or would she have 'the clinic doctor' see her. Since Whitney and I have neither of us seen more than one child in the last month and this was the day we set aside for that purpose, I spoke my mind. Then she said she had been told that we didn't see patients on Thursday! I believe it. If that were an isolated instance it would pass. But you get tired of having to push all the time. Dear won't it be swell to have a chance to get sick and tired of you? I mean to try hard.<sup>53</sup>

In this letter, Frieda expressed her disappointment in not seeing patients and her frustration at having to constantly request clinical experience at the Phipps. Though Frieda had less contact with patients in the TB clinic, she did have contact with the Institute's workers and confided to Edith about her sadness about her duties:

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<sup>53</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 19 May 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

Nearly all the workers at the Phipps seem to have tuberculosis. They come down to be x-rayed one after another just to keep track of it. It is a rather pathetic business because they know exactly where they are at and yet they are entirely casual about it.<sup>54</sup>

Despite her proximity to the disease, Frieda did not contract TB, and in answer to Edith's concerns, Frieda wrote, "As for having tuberculosis you remember I settled that question pretty thoroughly last year and my chest was quite negative this last time - I haven't more of a lesion than 20% of the population dying from other causes."<sup>55</sup> Frieda, however, brought her attention around to Edith, writing,

But lamb, how about yourself? As I think you have heard me as before the situation is thus:

- 1) Arthritis- recurrent
- 2) Repeated colds with cough and fever moderately severe, free intervals relatively brief slow recovery
- 3) a rather bad flu in your neighbourhood
- 4) Possibly TB contact in childhood

I'd like to take a picture of your chest. It isn't as pleasant as it sounds to know that there isn't any other place where you could get a better one – probably not as good.<sup>56</sup>

This reflected Frieda's concern for Edith and the prevalence of tuberculosis in both their lives. After some convincing, Edith had her lung x-rayed in Philadelphia, as was evidenced in Frieda's telegram, 24 August 1927: "Unless family prevent hope meet Sunday Philadelphia strongly advise x-ray chest here will understand if destination Toronto love Fraser."<sup>57</sup> The correspondence did not record the results of Edith's x-ray but tuberculosis afflicted their friends and family. Edith's sister Betty had the disease and one of their mutual friends, Alice McMaster, contracted TB and suffered a collapsed lung.

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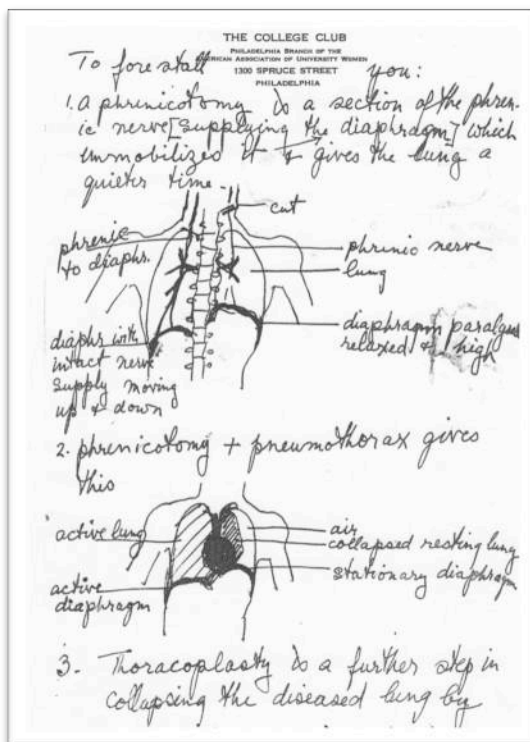
<sup>54</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 9 February 1927, File 11, Box, 036, FFPR.

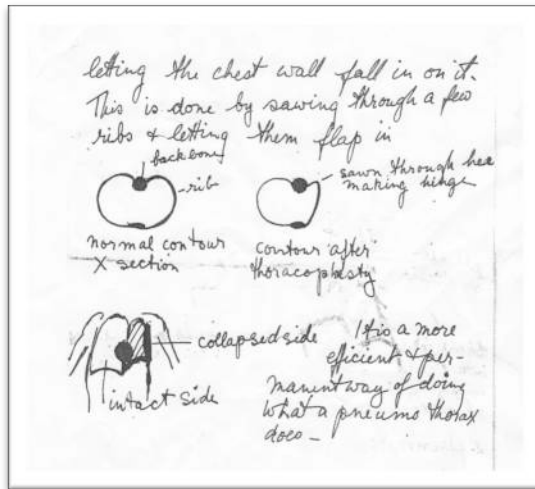
<sup>55</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 16 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Canadian National Telegram, 24 August 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

Ever the medic, Frieda shared with Edith a detailed explanation of an operation to rehabilitate a human lung. At the top of the page, Frieda wrote, “to forestall you,” in anticipation of Edith’s concerns and demonstrating her awareness of Edith’s interest in her. Frieda knew that Edith would find the detailed information about the operation comforting and Frieda was in a position to provide it. Professionally, this aided Frieda as an opportunity to speak in somewhat layperson’s terms regarding such operations.





In March 1927 Frieda was offered a research position at Connaught Laboratories, Toronto. The position was to begin in October, after Frieda's residency at the Phipps' Institute. Frieda traveled nine hours overnight by train to a Saturday morning interview in Toronto. Her decision to take the position was made in the presence of family members and close friends of the family:



Don [Frieda's brother] and I dashed down to the lab to see Fitz [head of Connaught Laboratories and Don's boss] where much uneasy medical conversation was had- job to start in Oct. and last till June to be part useful but mostly the advanced course in bacterial and immune.<sup>58</sup>

Edith, still in London, answered Frieda:

I'm glad you've taken this job at home and it was nice to have 3 letters from you on Saturday morning, but I almost burst into tears about it. I spent the entire morning sniffing hard – I don't know why quite – and people were most sympathetic about my getting a cold. I'm sure it is the thing to do and I'm only sorry that you won't be coming in this direction.<sup>59</sup>

These letters indicate the importance of this meeting to Frieda and the implications for Edith; Frieda would not be moving to England. In addition, her letter highlights how a research position for one female physician was obtained.<sup>60</sup> Family connections were key in Frieda's experience. Furthermore, Frieda's decision was an important one as it influenced the subsequent trajectory of her career. Frieda remained connected to the University of Toronto for the rest of her life. After Connaught, Frieda accepted a position in the Department of Bacteriology at the University of Toronto and then as lecturer in the University of Toronto's School of Hygiene and Preventative Medicine.

Not only did Frieda's choice of Connaught hold great implications for Frieda's career; Frieda's choice affected the future of her relationship with Edith. Frieda and Edith feared that should Frieda choose to work in Toronto, she would not be able to live with Edith, because Frieda would be bound up in her family, professionally as well as personally. Frieda found herself in an awkward position, but with the passionate support

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<sup>58</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 March 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>59</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 28 March 1927, File 07, Box 10, FFPR.

<sup>60</sup> Regina Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 163, 236. In particular, Morantz-Sanchez notes that the medical research fields of bacteriology were traditionally "resistant" to women. Rose Sheinin, *Women and Medicine in Toronto Since 1883* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987) documents the medical positions that many women graduates were able to obtain; very few were in research. See also Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons Archives for opportunities that were available to the few female graduates of Medical School who obtained their medical licenses.

of Edith, and despite some obstacles, Frieda and Edith were able to envision themselves as heading toward a better future.

### **Conclusion**

By examining the Fraser/Williams correspondence in terms of Frieda's training as a medical professional and in her written passion for Edith, it becomes clear that Frieda's devoted relationship with Edith contributed to Frieda's success in her medical training. Frieda's correspondence with Edith offered a professional forum, a space in which Frieda freely complained, vented, explained, played with and worked through issues that she faced in her daily experiences as a female intern and resident. Indeed, this chapter has highlighted the considerable emotional support that Frieda gained from her relationship to Edith during this period. When Frieda felt she was alone in her struggles, the constant stream of letters were assurances that she wasn't.

This chapter also contends that Frieda and Edith's intimate relationship was deepened by Frieda's professional life. It was critical for Frieda to have Edith know her as a medical professional just as it was to have Edith know Frieda as a "devoted partner." In terms of their future together, the prospect of Frieda's success offered the women the viable hope that they could indeed live in a devoted intimate partnership, independent of male financial support. Moreover, Frieda's medical profession offered successful examples of such devoted relationships. Their correspondence both strengthened Frieda and Edith's passionate relationship and linked that relationship to their professional worlds

## Chapter Five

### Architects of Desire: Professionalism, Partnership, and Family

Something must have happened, Time stood still,  
Here is our moment glowing and alive,  
It looks so sturdy I'm afraid it will  
Live to be 70 or 75.  
It can't be love, love comes and goes so fast.  
What do they call it when it seems to last? <sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the final section of the Fraser/Williams correspondence, which dates from the latter half of 1927 to 1943. While the previous chapters have shown how Frieda and Edith came to acknowledge their desire for each other, this chapter documents how the two women established their life-long partnership. The above poem, sent to Frieda from Edith in 1935, speaks to their struggle to define their partnership as both intimate and long lasting. Their partnership was flexible enough to withstand professional and familial pressures over decades and responded to the social and economic challenges of 1930s and 1940s Canada. This chapter is an inquiry into the material and social conditions that enabled two women to live out their desires in the form of a lifelong romantic partnership.

Edith and Frieda planned their lives together in the form of an architectural design around their desires. In their hopes and dreams they constructed a shared vision of their lives. Within the imaginary space of their shared vision, the two women played with ideas regarding their future together. In a physical way, their visions were drawn on

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 February 1935, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

paper, in the shape of house designs, discussions regarding adoption, and conversations about the kind of work they could do. The correspondence offered Frieda and Edith the groundwork for a well-planned partnership that was able to sustain the social and economic pressures of 1930s and 1940s Canada.

The chapter examines the ways that Edith and Frieda made the designs of their world on paper into an external reality. It looks closely at how their relationships to home, profession, and family contributed to the creation of a life-partnership built around their desires. I contend that the correspondence aided and delineated their efforts in building their lifelong partnership. In addition, the correspondence reveals a cognizance of the sacrifices that accompanied their success.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first, entitled “Imaginings,” documents Frieda and Edith's desires for, hopes about, and designs of their future as outlined in their correspondence. This section is organized around three themes – home, family, and profession. The second section, entitled “Realities,” looks at what actually transpired as Frieda and Edith attempted to turn their desires into reality. This section examines their efforts to bring into physical existence the imagined designs of their relationship. “Realities” is about how Frieda and Edith negotiated their family relationships and homes, how they maintained economic security as women professionals in the 1930s and 1940s, and finally what actually occurred when a child came into their lives and their home.

Frieda and Edith were both 28 years old when they returned to Toronto. Upon their return, Frieda lived with her brother Don in Wychwood Park and Edith lived with

her mother on Balmoral Avenue. The correspondence paused upon Frieda's return in 1927 and resumed in 1933, when Edith moved up to her farm in Aurora. By this time, each woman was 33 years old. They spent most of their weekends and free time together while also writing short notes to each other between Aurora and Toronto. Edith and Frieda were 42 years old when they moved in together in 1942, at which point their correspondence ended.

### **Imaginings**

In contrast to Edith and Frieda's earlier correspondence, which dealt with their hopes of reunion alongside their efforts to define the exact nature of their relationship, the correspondence from late 1926 to 1927 highlighted their negotiations with their external worlds. Once their devotion to each other had been openly "admitted on both sides," the subsequent letters were no longer driven by the angst of questioning their desires' significance and depth.<sup>2</sup> The letters of 1927 focused on plans for the future and decision-making. These letters were central in the process by which Edith and Frieda imagined and constructed their future together.

In July 1927, Edith moved back to Toronto from England. Frieda was still in Philadelphia finishing her residency and considering her options for the future. Most of the letters in this period were exchanged between Frieda in Philadelphia and Edith in Toronto. The correspondence ceased in December 1927, when Frieda returned to Toronto. It did not resume again until 1933, when the women again lived a distance apart.

The letters of 1927, written prior to Frieda's return to Toronto, saw Frieda and

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<sup>2</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 26 September 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

Edith planning how they could live with each other and not their mothers, how to afford children, and how to pursue their careers. These letters expressed their dreams of living together full time. Frieda and Edith framed the model of their relationship in terms of a middle class domestic ideal of the 1920s, complete with a large house, “heaps of kids,” and Frieda coming home for lunch.<sup>3</sup> This house was an imagined home, built on middle class domesticity. But the architectural model was also quite literal, as Edith and Frieda produced their imagined house designs on paper.

### **Dreams of a Home**

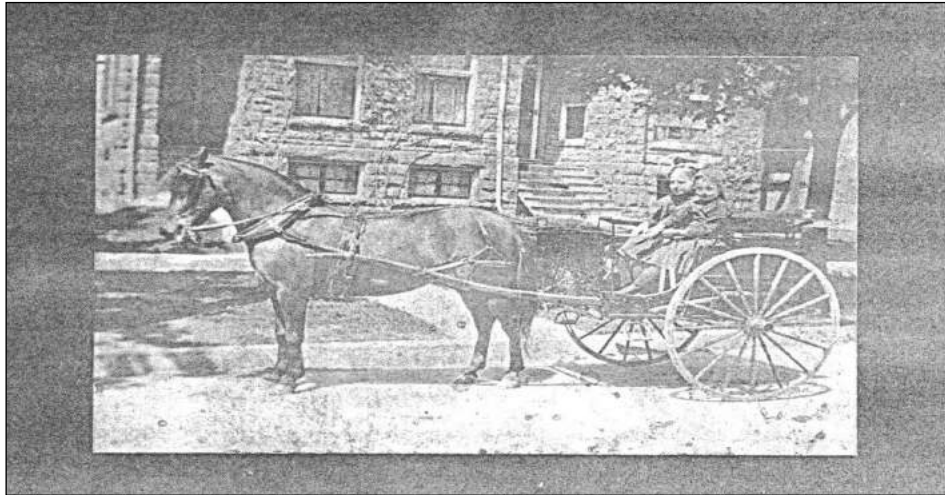
In one of her 1926 letters to Frieda, Edith drew a picture of a large house with several views—west, south, and east. The home was an expansive one, with double entrance doors, two chimneys, one very large fireplace, a large porch, and approximately eight double windows. Edith’s fantasy of their future home, complete with a nursery, defined their hopes as a family.

Edith’s vision also was modeled on her aunts’ lifestyle in England. Edith had visited and lived with a succession of aunts during her years in England; thus large homes were part of her subjective experience of independent existence. Edith’s drawing depicted a large house that could be either urban or rural and was a home for her, Frieda, and their children. Her architectural design was also reminiscent of Edith’s and Frieda’s childhood

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<sup>3</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, October 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR. For scholarship on the middle class domestic ideal of the 1920s, see Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan and Nancy M. Forestell, ed. *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999); Paul Axelrod *Making a Middle-Class: Student Life in English Canada during the Thirties*, (Kingston: Queen’s University Press, 1990); Karen Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

homes, as depicted in this photograph (circa 1905) of Frieda's family home on Madison Ave.



We do not have Edith's original design of her and Frieda's home, but we do have Frieda's response and Edith's revision of her original drawing. Frieda wrote,

Beloved,

You are awfully bright at that kind of thing. You even have the discretion to make the pipes and fireplaces do the right by each other. I'm quite satisfied with it as it stands but:

a) let us have a front and side elevation

b) do you think there could be a fireplace in the nursery above the one in the living room? It would be a great convenience and if you are cutting it from economy to cut out the ones over the stairs instead. There is a kind of mark in the nursery perhaps you did mean there to be a fireplace after all.

c) the stairs look a little cramped but I think that would be possible to arrange. they could do this.

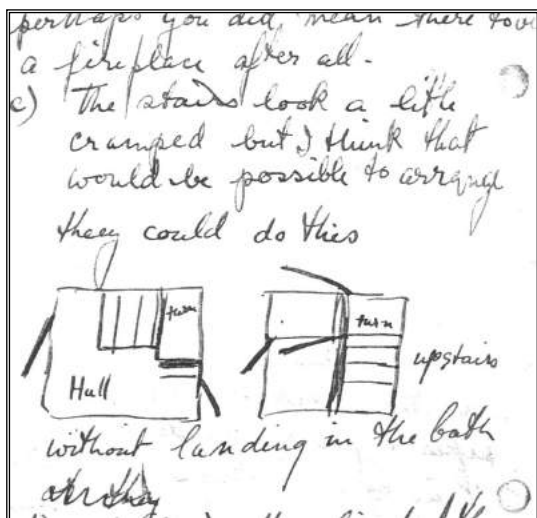


Figure 2. Frieda's drawing of the stairwell in their imagined home.

- d) What is the object of the hutch outside the kitchen; not that I mind
- e) I'd like to show it to mother as she takes a delight in these things particularly if compact but in the circumstances perhaps she wouldn't like it.
- f) 20x30 is just right <sup>4</sup>

Edith answered Frieda as follows:

Dear Frieda

I'm so glad you like my house - being ill has given me time to buy and arrange furniture - it really fits quite well - and I've re-arranged the stairs a bit after your pattern. The hutch outside the kitchen is a sort of verandah on which I am going to do odd jobs in hot weather. It is an idea I've always had and would like to try please. The nursery is to have a fire place - I thought I put it in.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, October 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>5</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 26 October 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.



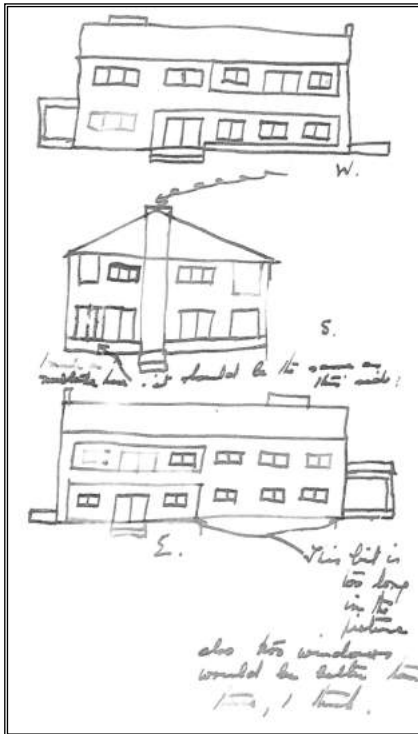


Figure 3. Edith's drawing of her and Frieda's future home.

Edith's letter revealed Frieda's support of her family dream as well as her need for Frieda's validation. In case Frieda's job necessitated that they live in the city, Edith also imagined an urban alternative. She wrote:

We are quite positively not going to live in the country if that is the life for you – it is simply appalling. We'll find somewhere else and heaps of kids to grow up happily in town. With a family long holiday in the summer it would do quite well.<sup>6</sup>

The act of designing their home supplied a physical image of Edith's and Frieda's shared vision. In addition, the process of making the drawings was accompanied by a sense of play and enjoyment in creating pictures of their future together.

The vision, however, did not include extended family. Notwithstanding the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

contemporary discourse regarding dutiful daughters and their obligations to their mothers, Frieda's and Edith's sketches did not specify any future living arrangements that included their mothers. Indeed, Frieda had made a conscious decision not to show her mother the drawing, as noted in Frieda's response to Edith: "e) I'd like to show it to mother as she takes a delight in these things particularly if compact but in the circumstances perhaps she wouldn't like it." The circumstance to which Frieda referred was her mother's disapproval of her daughter's partnership.

Hopes for a future together were also accompanied by fears of failure. Once Frieda had accepted the research position in Toronto, she expressed her fear that her remuneration might not adequately provide for Edith and their potential family. In a letter that discussed her rate of pay, Frieda referred to the economic possibility of raising twins together on her salary:

However-appointment to be until June 30 pay 125/month I don't know whether that misses out the summer or not. In any case, there is nothing to be done about it. If it is not enough to grow a twin on I'll find something between June and October – It seems a funny business that that kind of a job is always carried on with a wolf at the door.<sup>7</sup>

Frieda's references to the "wolf at the door" were indicative of her self-perception as the future breadwinner of the family. The wolf at the door was the landlord, the doctor, the government, or the authority that must be paid in order for her, her spouse, and their child to live. In stark contrast to the women's earlier architectural vision of a large and warm country home with two fireplaces, Frieda's terminology conjured up an image of a small family barely keeping a roof over their heads, with a landlord beating down their door.

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<sup>7</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 March 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

Frieda's fears were attached to her salary alongside her apprehension of her opportunities as a female medical practitioner.

### **Dreams of Domestic Partnership**

The dreams and hopes of lesbian couples living together either with or without their families are documented by historian Cameron Duder in “‘That Repulsive Abnormal Creature I Heard of in That Book’: Lesbians and Families in Ontario, 1920-1965.” Using correspondence between and interviews with Ontario lesbians, including the Fraser/Williams correspondence, Duder states that in many instances, lesbians before 1965 had stronger ties to their families of origin than was the case for those who came out in the 1970s in the context of the lesbian movement. In the earlier period, sexuality was indeed a site of conflict, but not of irrevocable and inevitable division. Though Duder does not define what he means when he says that the earlier familial relationships were “close,” he emphasizes that many Ontario parents were tolerant of their wayward daughters, particularly before the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the “wayward daughters” had less financial independence with which to break familial ties. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the formation of urban lesbian communities was instrumental in providing the social support structures necessary for lesbians to break from their natal families.<sup>9</sup> The Fraser/Williams correspondence suggests that some lesbians of the pre-WWII era remained close to their family of origin while others did not. Some parted ways with their families entirely but others remained close to individual members of their families of

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<sup>8</sup> Cameron Duder, “‘That Repulsive Abnormal Creature I Heard of in That Book’: Lesbians and Families in Ontario, 1920-1965,” in *Ontario Since Confederation: A Reader*, ed. Edgar-Andre Montigny and Lori Chambers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 262.

<sup>9</sup> Duder, “‘That Repulsive Abnormal Creature I Heard of in That Book,’” 261.

origin. For example, Frieda's older brother Donald supported Frieda in her choice to not live with their mother and he shared his apartment with Frieda upon her return to Toronto in 1927. He and his family remained close to Frieda and Edith throughout their lives.

The Fraser/Williams correspondence suggests that a woman's class status informed the kinds of sexual choices available to her. Middle class conventions tended to dictate particular behavioural expectations for the middle-class daughter. Certainly love for their families and financial needs were incentives for Frieda and Edith to remain close to their families. These factors were well ensconced within middle class social propriety. As their letters attest, Frieda and Edith were acutely aware of their expected social roles as dutiful daughters. Yet by imagining different lives from those of their mothers, Edith and Frieda disobeyed social expectations and procured employment that enabled their independence. Most significantly, they disobeyed familial expectations by not pursuing heterosexual marriage.

The role of the dutiful daughter, whether "devoted" or not, and the demands this imposed upon Canadian single women of this era is documented in the biography of Canadian-born New York journalist Constance Lindsay Skinner. Historian Jean Barman highlights the pressures exerted upon Skinner by her maternal relatives in the 1920s. Skinner's family demanded that she return home to Vancouver to look after her bedridden mother. When Skinner balked and wrote that she only would be able to visit for a while, her maternal aunt gave her an angry ultimatum, writing:

Your mother needs you with her not for a visit but permanently. She needs a daughter's love and daily attention and the attention in things a servant cannot undertake. It is your privilege to leave New York entirely until such time as your

mother does not need you.<sup>10</sup>

Returning home for a protracted length of time would have meant the end of Skinner's writing career. Because she could not fulfill her aunt's demands, she never saw her mother again; nor did she feel entitled to attend her mother's funeral.

For Canadian white women of the middle class, imagining a life that was independent of one's family was typically constrained by dominant cultural discourses about the relationship between mother and daughter. Social attitudes regarded the mother-daughter relationship as a particularly special one, emphasizing a daughter's love and obligation. A daughter kept close to her family because, as a 1935 *Canadian Magazine* article noted, "girls enriched family life since they did not break home ties so early as boys and outside interests do not play so large a part in their lives."<sup>11</sup> Historian Suzanne Morton confirms the social expectation of daughters' roles, noting that one of the reasons that so many people preferred to adopt girls was a belief that girls were more likely to remain home.

Frieda had been raised in a culture that cherished a daughter's relationship to home and mother and for her to dream otherwise presented a conflict not only with her mother, but also with her social milieu. Frieda's mother demanded a great deal of her daughter's attention and Frieda's letters acknowledged her divided loyalties between Edith and her mother. Mrs. Fraser's professional connections made Frieda's hopes of living with Edith even more challenging. Frieda studied under Dr. Maurice McPhedran in

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Barman, *Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 148.

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Morton, quoting a 1935 *Canadian Magazine* article by Frederick Given in "'To Take an Orphan': Gender and Family Roles Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion," in *Gendered Pasts*, 113.

Philadelphia (the McPhedran and Fraser families were friendly) and Frieda procured employment at the University of Toronto's Connaught Laboratories, also through the McPhedrants. In these contexts, her mother expected Frieda to live with her upon her return to Toronto in 1927.

Edith's story was different in intent and in outcome. Edith did not attempt to maintain a balance between her own family and her devotion to Frieda. Moreover, Edith's letters did not reveal the same need for her mother's approval as was demonstrated in Frieda's. Nor was Edith's family in the same position to affect Edith's employment opportunities. Indeed, Mrs. Williams never visited Edith abroad and she attempted to persuade Edith to remain in England, away from Frieda. Like Frieda, however, Edith repeatedly expressed her hopes to not to live with her mother upon her return to Toronto. Not living with their mothers for both women meant more chances of being with each other. Even though living with each other remained a distant goal, having residences separate from their mothers were steps toward their goal of building their lives together.

### **Dreams of Family**

Edith and Frieda's conception of their domestic partnership assumed the inclusion of children. For instance, Edith's drawing of their home included a nursery. Neither Edith nor Frieda had any discussion regarding the necessity of a nursery; rather the nursery was an assumed component of the house design. As the house was a shared imaginary space in which their shared future could be constructed, the imagined nursery was a symbol of the kind of relationship planned by the two women. The nursery represented a shared

investment in a future life, a life that extended beyond their own generation.

Edith and Frieda were part of a generation of women in the 1920s and 1930s for whom having children was considered a fulfillment of the virtues of womanhood.<sup>12</sup>

Veronica Strong-Boag emphasizes the strength of the discourse of Canadian motherhood in this era. Girls were expected to be mothers in the making, and even if girls were able to reject a maternal role, “girls would be hard put to escape the realization that normalcy for their sex was inextricably linked with mothering, whether biological or social.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed Morton notes that definitions of femininity in this period “were so closely linked to maternity that women who shirked motherhood were regarded as unnatural or not normal.”<sup>14</sup> Given the strong cultural links between motherhood and womanhood, Frieda and Edith were hard-pressed to imagine themselves as women without children.

Bestselling novels of the era conveyed the message that if a woman could not have children, she should adopt. Morton notes that the popular novel Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm by Kate Wiggins tells the story of 10 year old Rebecca Rowena Randall, who lived with her elderly spinster aunts in rural Maine. Eleanor Porter’s Pollyanna, published in 1912, is about 11 year old Pollyanna Whittier, who changes the lives of her spinster aunts in small town Vermont. Finally, Canada’s most famous orphan story, Anne of Green Gables by author Lucy Maud Montgomery, had Anne Shirley, a Nova Scotia orphan, sent to live with her spinster aunt and bachelor brother in rural Prince Edward Island. These

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<sup>12</sup> In 1921 over 150,000 copies of Dr. Helen MacMurchy’s The Canadian Mother’s Book were distributed to women across Canada. By 1933, this figure grew to 800,000, as noted in Castell Hopkins, Canadian Annual Review of Politics and Public Affairs: 1922 (Toronto: Annual Review Ltd, 1923), 418.

<sup>13</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, The New Day Recalled: The Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939 (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Morton, 108.

were all popular publications with which Frieda and Edith would have been familiar.

Additionally, cultural notions about adoption reinforced women's roles as mothers, meaning that families were not necessarily biological in nature. Morton contends that those who intended to adopt understood the roles of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons in ways that transcended any strictly biological meaning of the definition of family. Provinces across Canada passed adoption laws that reflected public attitudes. In 1921, Ontario passed the 1921 Ontario Adoption Law, which placed adoption, previously a private affair, under the purview of the Ontario government. The new law introduced restrictive guidelines regarding the disclosure of information that involved the adoption. These guidelines reflected the dominant public view that a child was shaped by environment, rather than genetics, and thus there was no need for adoptees to know about their biological roots. In keeping with the full erasure of birth parent history, this legislation permitted foster parents to grant foster children the same rights as their biologically related counterparts.<sup>15</sup> This broad conception of family was reflected in Frieda's correspondence.

Many professional women of Frieda's generation adopted children. In her letter to Edith, Frieda discussed one of the resident female doctors in New York who was an adoptive parent:

She is a nice woman. Damn good at her job and quite a human as well. She also has three adopted children who seem to be a success. They are grown up, as it isn't too soon to say—Quite a lot of attendings have kids of their own that don't seem to interfere with their jobs.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Morton, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 9 June 1926, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.



Frieda and Edith thus assumed that parenthood was an option for their partnership. As their relationship became more secure, they imagined having children.<sup>17</sup> What is striking, however, is Edith and Frieda's specific belief that they would raise twins. In the correspondence, Edith introduced the subject of adoption with the idea of having twins. How they should raise their twins was often the topic of light banter in their 1927 correspondence. Twins were desirable to Edith and Frieda in part because they were more likely to be available for adoption. Frieda wrote from Toronto:

Isn't it funny that people don't want twins? Mother and Jane McPh. [McPhedran] are the only people I know who would like them.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly the expense and work of raising twins was an issue, but there is no secondary evidence that confirms or denies Edith's logic. While both Strong-Boag's and Morton's research on orphans and adoption confirms an overwhelming preference for white adoptive girls, known also as "Blue Ribbon Babies,"<sup>19</sup> there was no indication of how twins fared.<sup>20</sup> Strong-Boag notes, however, that "sibling groups" were difficult to place. Frieda and Edith may have thought that since twins were difficult to place, they would have a better chance of adopting them.

Imagining herself as a parent of twins exposed Frieda's doubts about her and Edith's chances for success. Pragmatically, Frieda was aware that she would likely be the

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<sup>17</sup> Because of the informality of the process, same-sex sexuality or women living together as parents was apparently not taken into consideration when women wanted to adopt children. Little is known in regards to these private deliberations. When government agencies became involved, the sexuality of the parents became an issue, as evidenced by Daniel Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and their Children in the United States since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 December 1926, FFPR.

<sup>19</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *Finding Families, Finding Ourselves: English Canada Encounters Adoption from the Nineteenth Century to the 1990s* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Morton notes, "Of the 389 individual requests for Halifax orphans surviving in this collection of letters, 215 requested girls, 86 requested boys, 37 requested either boys or girls, 34 requested both and 17 did not state a preference." Morton, "To Take An Orphan," 113.

primary breadwinner of the family and frequently mentioned her fear of “the wolf at the door.” High rents and health care costs deterred the two women from planning a move to Philadelphia. From Philadelphia, Frieda wrote:

As to the twins. It doesn't look as if they could be done here [Philadelphia]. Rents and so forth are arranged to keep one in indigence. You can imagine how hung up we would be if you started to carry on with this cough of yours and me with my assorted miseries if we had twins to throw to the wolf at the door.<sup>21</sup>

Frieda felt that adopting twins “would be more expedient in Toronto than anywhere else.”<sup>22</sup> But living in Toronto meant the prospect of living with their families, to which Edith responded, “Of course if we both live with our families we'll never be able to adopt the twins.”<sup>23</sup> Frieda and Edith's dreams of family and partnership were structured by their economic circumstance and social obligations.

Despite the uncertainties, Frieda and Edith were encouraged by their knowledge of other women in similar situations. Edith wrote to Frieda about two women in a partnership who were raising a little boy:

Oh, Mollies cousin, [who is a ]nurse from Paris, had a friend aged 32 [who is] French, unmarried, [and] a nurse at the American hospital there, who adopted a child three years ago and has a friend living with her who keeps house and looks after it. Apparently everyone prophesized disaster but it's been all right so far - so other people have our idea too!<sup>24</sup>

The perceived availability of babies, such as those placed in advertisements for adoption, fueled Edith's hopes for a child, even though Edith seemed to be joking with Frieda when she mentioned a specific advertisement:

There was an advertisement in the Times this morning for someone to adopt a

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<sup>21</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 November 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>22</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 18 January 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>23</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 1 February 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>24</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 29 June 1927, File 08, Box 010, FFPR.

quite new baby. I was pining to go and see it but I've nowhere to keep it at the moment. I don't think Mr. M. would like me to bring it to work with me, do you?<sup>25</sup>

With children in their life plans, Edith and Frieda made some efforts to procure a child or children. Wanting, waiting, and hoping that the twins would find their way to their doorstep was not enough. Edith read advertisements in the papers and both women asked friends and family for children. Indeed, Strong-Boag notes that such informality characterized many adoption arrangements and kin were often the first private adopters to be considered.

Notwithstanding their great investment in adoption, Edith and Frieda's interest was conditional. Edith wrote from London:

If Mona has twins she is going to give me one because she only wants a singleton. I think she is crazy but I said I'd only take it if it was sound in wind and limb, etc. Do you approve? Oh my lamb, I wish I could come and see you- and-but it all comes down to the fact that I love you-B.<sup>26</sup>

Edith's comment regarding children displayed sensitivity towards the adoption of siblings alongside an apparent disregard for babies born with difficulties. In her comment that Mona only wanted a "singleton" and that Mona "was crazy" for the idea of separating the two babies, Edith might have been genuinely concerned for the siblings or she might have been indicating her desire for twins. She offered a more callous comment in the next sentence, in which she insisted that her potential baby had to be "sound in wind and limb," which presumably meant that it had to have healthy lungs and strong bones. This prejudiced statement about a potential child reflected the extent of stigma that was

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<sup>25</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 January 1927, File 08, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>26</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 26 November 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.

attached to disability. Frieda also expressed prejudice in their exchanges about adoption:

I hope Mona has twins. Does she really mean it? Of course I approve that would be a perfect specimen. She would want to make it a catholic or some thing and retract at the last minute. They all do anyway.<sup>27</sup>

Here Frieda generalized about Catholic mothers and assumed the worst about adopting a child born to a Catholic woman.

As a medical person in obstetrics at the New York Infirmity, Frieda had more contact with women and their babies, which made her more realistic *and* more pessimistic about their chances of adopting a child or twins. “They all do anyway” signaled her cynicism about women who planned on giving up their babies for adoption and then changed their minds. Strong-Boag’s research confirms Frieda’s cynicism. She notes that the majority of single mothers appear to have kept their babies. The same dogmatic celebration of motherhood that fueled Frieda and Edith’s efforts to adopt made it all the more difficult for birth mothers to accept the loss of their offspring.<sup>28</sup>

Morton’s work reveals an informal approach to adoption even during the interwar period. At the popular level there was often no great distinction between the meaning of fostering and adoption. Strong-Boag echoes Morton’s findings, noting the “persistent informality of many arrangements,” despite the existence of adoption laws. Frieda’s letters offer examples of the casual talk regarding adoption, the informal familial arrangements that took place, and the attitude that many had towards having girl children.<sup>29</sup> In relation to the latter, Frieda wrote from Philadelphia:

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<sup>27</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 27 December 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>28</sup> Strong-Boag, *Finding Families*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Morton acknowledges the preference for boys for adoption if they were to carry on the family name and the preference for girls who were envisioned to provide company, enrich family life, do housework, and

Jane MacPhedran [wife of Maurice MacPhedran] had promised me 50% of her future failures, i.e. girls, but I notice these arguments never come to anything.<sup>30</sup>

Frieda thus maintained a negative outlook. The casual nature of the adoption process also meant a casual approach to promises made. Not one to depend solely on one source for children, Frieda made more inquiries with other women professionals:

I went for another walk with Frances Harrison this evening. She is going to keep an eye open for the twins. She thinks I would do quite well as an amateur parent. Her job is in a clinic where they have kids who get into trouble at school not the F.M.'s [feebleminded] but the average or abnormally intelligent. Of course they're kinda old but it is swell to have more than one egg basket for our hypothetical eggs.<sup>31</sup>

In this letter, Frieda's use of her professional connections demonstrates the fluid boundaries between women's professional and personal worlds. Frieda made use of women in her professional world to facilitate her and Edith's desire for children in their passionate world. Once more, there were conditions placed upon the kinds of children they might adopt. With Frances Harrison, Frieda commented that the children at her clinic were "kinda old" but that they [Frieda and Edith] might have to settle for that. The option for children with a disability, however, remained unthinkable, as indicated in Frieda's dismissive referral to those children who were "F.M.'s." Meanwhile, Frieda's use of the egg metaphor acknowledged the centrality of the parental bond of attachment rather than the biological relation through genetics or the birth process.

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adapt more easily. Morton, "To Take an Orphan," 113.

<sup>30</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 29 May 1927, File 09, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>31</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 5 June 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR. On feeble-mindedness, see James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Steven Noll and James Trent, ed. *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Angus McLaren, *Reproduction by Design: Sex, Robots, Trees and Test-tube Babies in Interwar Britain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Jana Grekul, Arvey Krahn, Dave Odynak, "Sterilizing the Feeble-minded: eugenics in Alberta, Canada, 1929-1972," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17, no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 358-384.

Parental success was scientifically determined in Frieda's medical milieu. Frieda wanted Edith to know that, in the opinion of a professional, she would make an adequate parent. This relates to what historian Katrina Srigley notes as the "heyday" of scientific motherhood. During the 1920s and beyond, mothers, social workers, and child psychologists were all held responsible for the success of home and children.<sup>32</sup> Thus Frieda was buoyed by Frances Harrison's professional opinion of her as a potential mother.

Frieda's high regard for professionalism informed her own potential identity as a mother. Interestingly, she referred to herself as an "amateur" parent, not a *parent* or a *mother*. Could this be because she was not going to be the woman who had birthed the child and more likely going to be the breadwinner of the potential family? Could this be because she and Edith were not having children in the "traditional" way? Did being an amateur parent mean that one was less of a parent? Did Frieda see herself, as an "amateur parent," as someone who would have to raise children who were not "Blue Ribbon babies"? In the context of these questions, Frieda and Edith's discussions concerned specific types of children: twins (siblings), girls ("failures"), and older troubled children.

Edith perceived that their opportunities for adopting children were quite plentiful, regardless of the kinds of children that they had envisioned. She felt that she could afford the time to wait until she and Frieda were properly prepared. However, her prediction that they might miss their chance was also one of her fears. Edith wrote:

But doubtless, there'll be others [opportunities for adoption] later on, or I might

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<sup>32</sup> Katrina Srigley "Working Lives and Simple Pleasures: Single, Employed Women in Depression-Era City, 1929-1939" (Ph.D. diss. University of Toronto, 2005), 108.

see what I could do if the worst comes. But probably by the time we could adopt one, I'll be too old.<sup>33</sup>

She was often the one to hope for the best and have the positive outlook, but in this letter, as she pondered the future, she sounded a bit dejected. Here, Edith was uncharacteristically frank in her consideration that by the time she and Frieda were able to adopt a child, they would be too old.

Despite the potential failure of adoption, Frieda and Edith's efforts at planning a family also served a second purpose. The prospective twins existed as a subject of joint interest upon which Frieda and Edith deliberated and learned more about each other. The prospect of having twins deepened their relationship in their discussions of the twins' lives. For example, the two women debated religion, education, schooling, and the kind of work they hoped for their twins. They discussed whether their children should be professionals or enjoy life. Edith and Frieda learned not only about what they wanted for their children, but also about what was important in each other's lives.

Much like expectant parents, adoptive or otherwise, Frieda and Edith fantasized about how their twins might look or act. In their light banter, they discussed their twins' personalities, discipline, and how they might get their twins to behave.<sup>34</sup> Unlike expectant parents, however, Edith and Frieda did not muse about the names or the sexes of their future children.

Obtaining particular items for their future children brought the twins' existence imaginatively closer to the two women. They saved various items for the twins in

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<sup>33</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 October 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>34</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 October 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

anticipation of their arrival. From London, Edith saved a map of the London Zoo.<sup>35</sup>

Frieda saved a first edition of When We Were Very Young and inscribed it with both of their initials, signifying their dual parentage.<sup>36</sup> These childrens' artifacts symbolized, in a concrete way, Edith and Frieda's vision of their future family.

Oddly, Frieda and Edith referred to "the twins" as if they already existed and it was up to the children to somehow show themselves. But it was also Edith and Frieda's responsibility to make the conditions possible for the twins to arrive. Edith wrote about the reasons that the twins were not appearing:

Or do you think that we had better stop talking about them? They might not like being talked about and that is why they are pretending that they'll never come.<sup>37</sup>

Despite her hopes that they might raise children, Edith was nevertheless clear when writing to Frieda that her chief hope lay in their plans to live together. In England, sick at home with the flu, Edith wrote:

Being absolutely idle like this gives me such heaps of time to think about you and it is so extremely pleasant. So you think we'll even manage to live together? Even without the twins it would be heavenly wouldn't it? But I would like them too. It is all so nice to plan even if it doesn't come off. Oh my lamb, I dream about you so often that I begin to count on it.<sup>38</sup>

Thus Edith described her hope for them to live together so strongly that she indicated that she was beginning to count on it. To entertain the possibility of children for the two women only solidified their perception of each other as life partners.

In seeking out children to raise, Frieda and Edith's actions highlighted informal and professional sources for adoption. Furthermore, their actions signaled diversity in the

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<sup>35</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 10 April 1927, File 08, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>36</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 November 1926, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>37</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 10 April 1927, File 08, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>38</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 31 December 1926, File 06, Box 010, FFPR.



formation of families and support Strong-Boag's contention that "the classical family of western nostalgia" has camouflaged the reality of family history. Strong-Boag contends that families are formed in diverse ways that are then disguised and/or hidden by family members in order to preserve the dominant order, recalling the words of law journalist

Carol Stuart:

Families are fluid things which spill over into irregular shapes with irregular bondings and unions, with improper relationships, with too many or too few children, with children of different parentage, with 'aunts' who are not really aunts, 'cousins' who are not really cousins, and 'fathers' who are not really fathers.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed the diversity of family formation was evidenced by Frieda and Edith's casual efforts in asking a friend for a twin, their use of professional connections, their seemingly obsessive approach to obtaining children by a variety of means, and their wish for a child who was "sound in wind and limb." At the same time, their efforts signaled diverse parental attitudes towards potential children. In order to achieve their family, the women accessed all possible avenues and they considered the prospect of adopting children that were considered less desirable.

Edith and Frieda's persistence also reflected a childless couple's poignant desperation for children. Their actions, such as imagining their future child, considering finances, collecting items, and reflecting upon parenting suitability, echoed the letters of other childless couples and single people who desired children. Morton provides such examples in the touching letters of single and childless couples of the same decades who offered to adopt orphans in the aftermath of the Halifax explosion. But their choices also

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<sup>39</sup> Carol Smart, "Stories of Family Life: Cohabitation, Marriage and Social Change," *Canadian Journal of Family Law* 17, no. 1 (2000), 22. As quoted by Strong-Boag, *Finding Families*, 6.

incorporated conditions.

Complicating their hopes even further, Edith and Frieda were ill-prepared to take a child into their home. At that point they did not *have* a home. Edith, only briefly at the end of 1926, offered a realistic grasp of their situation:

Toronto would be easier to manage the twins in than anywhere else, but we'd never be able to leave our families and still live there. Oh dear it is all so sickening. But I am beginning to think that anything would be better than being away from you for so long at a time.<sup>40</sup>

In the same letter, Edith expressed great pessimism about the prospects of living together and adopting a child in Toronto:

You will go home and live with your family and so will I; and we'll going on doing the same thing for the next 20 years. Then our families will die probably and we'll try to live together and not get on and it will be too late to adopt the twins. Or you'd stay in Philadelphia and after this year I'll find a job in N.Y. to be near you, or later perhaps in Phil. And you'd spend your time being sorry you weren't in Toronto. It's a cheerful prospect.<sup>41</sup>

By looking at their dreams for family in a more somber light, Edith and Frieda could discuss the ways in which they could turn their hopes into realities. Edith wrote:

Or do you think that if we go on for a bit there is a chance that we'd be able to live together sometime not too far away? Or shall we go home and put our feet down and say we're going to take a flat together. And retire into it and lock those who object out? I think that anything is preferable to looking forward to years of this.<sup>42</sup>

Frieda's and Edith's dreams of family were nevertheless framed by constant assurances of their unwavering loyalty. Even if their hopes for children went unfulfilled, Edith and Frieda affirmed their undiminishing devotion. Edith closed her letters with

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<sup>40</sup> Edith to Frieda, December 1926, Box 010, File, FFPR.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 January 1927, File 6, Box 010, FFPR.

touching sentiments, such as, “You have my love dearest, as far ahead as I can see”<sup>43</sup>

Frieda also reminded Edith of her complete attachment:

Is it a long time since I have told you? I love you with all my soul  
and strength.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of their tribulations, both women continue to imagine their future together. By repeatedly acknowledging themselves as a couple with a future, with or without children, the correspondence suggests that the women privileged their desire to live together as a couple beyond all other hopes. Their correspondence demonstrates their conviction that they were becoming closer and closer over their years of writing. And the future for

Frieda held only an increase in the quality of their love:

O my lamb, there is something about it that is much more sure than last year.  
Don't you think so? Why?<sup>45</sup>

Frieda also assured Edith of her future devotion even through difficult years:

I wonder about the next three [years], O my beloved, it will take the best of us to  
weather it. And yet, weakling though I am, I am eager to begin. Because then you  
will be here.<sup>46</sup>

In March 1927, Edith reflected upon her time in London and her hopes for the future.

These letters convey both the agonies of her frustrated desire to be with Frieda and her confidence that someday, when they were together, they would look back upon these years with amusement:

The embankment just down from here is an awfully bad bit in connection with  
you. I suppose it is because I spent rather a lot of time there in the spring when  
wanting you was bad. Today it was so overwhelming that I had to lean over the  
parapet to recover. We'll probably be amused at all this sometime later on when

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<sup>43</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 11 April 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>44</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 20 March 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>45</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 9 March 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>46</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 19 July 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

we're here together.<sup>47</sup>

In the same letter, Edith imagined that even if they were living together, she might forget for a minute and then all of a sudden realize that she indeed was living her hope:

If we lived together, it will take an awfully long time to get used to it. Oh, I don't mean that quite. It is that I'd find myself wanting you like the devil in the middle of the afternoon at my job, forgetting that you'll be there in the evening. But won't it be fun remembering suddenly that we're living together?<sup>48</sup>

### Hopes for Career

The letters of 1927 outlined hopes for home and children and conveyed a sense of future longtime devotion. In the months before the end of Frieda's residency in July 1927 and Edith's return to Canada in the fall, Edith and Frieda helped each other plan their careers. Edith considered the possibilities of running a farm or attending agricultural school, while Frieda debated where to continue her medical studies in Toronto. At the same time, Edith also considered the advantages and disadvantages for their relationship with respect to Frieda's career. At one point in January, Frieda told Edith that she had been offered a position that required travel to Europe:

Dr. Fitzgerald has offered me a job with a travelling fellowship referred to before. The travelling would probably be the first year, but might not be until the third. The job would be more or less permanent. If I stay on it might or might not be available in a year. I have to let him know by March as he is going to England and would arrange about seeing people there, etc. What should I do? The present job has enough work in it to go on for years if they want me but at best this is a disgusting place to live and the uncertainty of getting appointed yearly would be unpleasant – on the other hand of course is my family.<sup>49</sup>

Edith responded to Frieda's option by commenting on the prospect of proximity:

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<sup>47</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 31 January 1927, File7, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>49</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 18 January 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

I don't know what we'd better do. Dr. F's job sounds swell and I'd be awfully tempted to take it if I were you. Besides it would be so nice to have you on this side of the world for a bit.<sup>50</sup>

In the same letter, Edith reflected on what might happen if Frieda returned to Toronto:

What about living with your family? I don't know whether living with mine is worth it. It is hell not to see you, but whether being with them's a smaller one, I can't describe. Of course, if we both live with our families we'll never be able to adopt the twins.<sup>51</sup>

In her answer to Edith's letter, Frieda deliberated over accepting employment in Philadelphia (with Dr. Fitzgerald in a position that included a travelling fellowship) or in Toronto (with her brother at University of Toronto's Connaught Laboratories). Taking the job in Philadelphia meant distance from Edith, whereas moving to Toronto meant that she would be expected to live at home with her mother, which meant that her freedom to see Edith would be strictly curtailed.

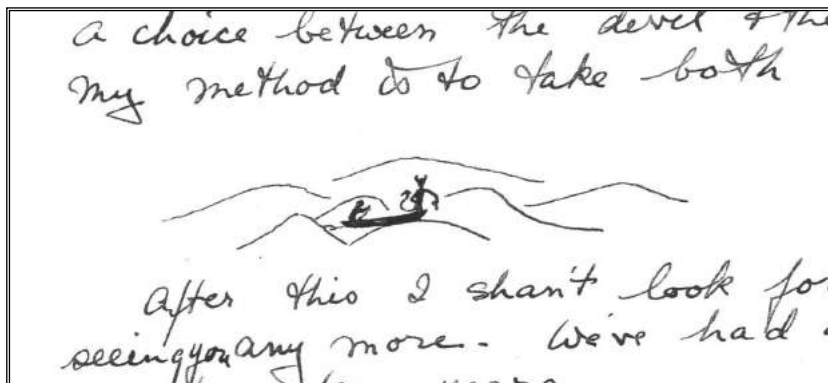
Frieda drew a cartoon that depicted her struggle, framing it as having to make a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea. In her cartoon, she depicted herself in a canoe with the devil in the deep blue sea. We do not know precisely the meaning of Frieda's drawing, but perhaps the deep blue sea represented Philadelphia or an unknown place and perhaps the devil represented living in Toronto with her mother. Nevertheless, Frieda, having listened to Edith's frustrations, explained her predicament:

Well, Buddie, that being so perhaps I had better take Fitz's offer and be done with it. When given a choice between the devil and the deep sea my method is to take both as thus:

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<sup>50</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 2 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>51</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 1 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.



**Figure 4. Frieda's drawing of the devil and the deep blue sea.**

Frieda continued, "After this I shan't look forward to seeing you any more. We've had a damned good ten years."<sup>52</sup> Both choices did not seem to include a career move that would have the two women living together. Frieda saw herself as defeated either way. A week later, she detailed her employment deliberations:

Lamb: This here job question is getting urgent. If I stay here:

- a) helluva hole
- b) Helluva climate Maurice may go
- d) I may get chucked any year
- e) I may get tuberculosis, cancer, electrocute (only for heaven's sake don't tell Bud!)
- f) probably no Bud, never no more

If I go to Toronto:

- a) I shall always be doing the wrong thing
- b) In the character of the black sheep I shall be negativistic till I can't put one foot in front of the other
- c) I shall become calcified like Erskine Keyes, the Hargreaves women, and the people at the library
- d) I shall be recognized simply and exclusively as "Don Fraser's sister."
- e) I shan't get anything done at my job that is worth recording
- f) Very Probably no Bud never no more. Oh Hell! What's a young girl to do? If I could drive a bargain about not being disapproved of all the time at home, I'd go like a shot.<sup>53</sup>

Edith's response was on the hopeful side, revealing a determination propped up against

<sup>52</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 2 February 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>53</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 6 March 1927, File 11, Box 036, FFPR.

Frieda's resignation. In one letter she stated:

Something will turn up, my dear, and you needn't think that there'll be 'no Bud, never, no more' there's only one way to do that, I don't think you'll be taking that. Oh my lamb, what a funny thing it all is<sup>54</sup>

Edith's oblique reference to a desperate measure ("there's only one way to do that") was indicative of the depth of her determination, but she used this language as a way to assure Frieda of her loyalty.

Like Edith, Frieda was also hesitant to move back to Toronto. She believed that she would be living her life under her older brother's shadow, noting, "I shall be recognized simply and exclusively as 'Don Fraser's sister'" and "I shan't get anything done at my job that is worth recording." In addition, Frieda saw herself as an outsider who was more familiar with her family's disapproval than her family's support; and without that support she feared she might never reach her potential to do something medically noteworthy and thereby step out from beneath her brother's shadow. Nevertheless, in all situations Frieda feared that Edith might not be there.

On the other side of the Atlantic in July 1927, faced with the prospect of returning to Toronto, Edith raised the idea of living in the country and raising animals. While still in England, she wrote to Frieda regarding the possibility of a farm:

I wish I could find out if a woman could make enough to live on by living on a small place in the country and buying a few odd animals and growing things. It could be done well not far from Toronto but far enough to keep my family from living with me.<sup>55</sup>

Edith's questions about surviving on a little farm were answered with the unexpected

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<sup>54</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 18 March 1927, File 07, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>55</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 July 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

inheritance of a farm. The correspondence does not explain why Edith was selected for the inheritance. What we do know is that in September 1927, Edith announced:

On the other hand I am having 12 acres of vegetables and fruit thrust at me by a benighted cousin-in-law, who bought it from someone to be philanthropic, and now doesn't know what to do with it. I am having the Government Agricultural man look it over and he's going to tell me whether it would be all right. If so, I almost think something might be done about it. It is about a mile west of Thornhill and sounds nice although I haven't seen it yet. Do you think it would be nice? I'd spend part of the winter doing a couple of courses at Guelph perhaps. Is it a good idea?<sup>56</sup>

Frieda answered:

If this piece of land of yours is any good it would look like another of the Lord's provision's—If I were looking for a religion on a sound business footing I would certainly make haste to sit at your feet. It seems to be exactly what you want doesn't it? *Rus in urbe atque procal negotis ver pietate* [country in the city for a more pious way of life]. I think it is a swell idea provided it is that or a job not that and a job. It would amuse me if you were so carried away by your propaganda in London and that you came to Canada and farmed yourself. A handsome tribute to your own efficiency.<sup>57</sup>

Frieda was apparently the only person who supported Edith's farming ideas. The ironic position in which Edith found herself was not lost on Frieda. At the Ontario Government office in London, part of Edith's work consisted of processing English applications for emigration to Canada. During the 1920s, the Canadian government attempted to promote farming in Canada to encourage English immigration. Now Edith was thinking about returning to Canada to farm.

Upon her return to Toronto, Edith once again mentioned the agricultural training she could apply to receive at the Ontario Agricultural College:

Dear Frieda – I have the Ontario government Agricultural man on the track of

<sup>56</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 September 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>57</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 16 September 1927, File 12, Box 31, FFPR.



my place and I'm really beginning to be thrilled. I'm glad you like the idea. They tell me that I ought to do bees extensively – you'll have to tell me all about them! Also my lamb, there's a swell course at Guelph beginning almost at once and I'm thinking very hard of running down to do it. It seems that it is full now but I daresay it manage to take me too if I set my mind to it. The Lord does provide doesn't he? Everyone thinks that it is the craziest idea, so I'm glad you don't.<sup>58</sup>

Edith applied to the Ontario School of Agriculture in 1927, but was informed that it was full. Nevertheless she was now hopeful as part of her dream of life in the country with Frieda was on the horizon. Meanwhile, Frieda hoped for two things: to live anywhere with Edith and to distinguish herself in medicine.

### **Realities**

This section explores the remainder of the Fraser/Williams correspondence. It covers three decades of what became an established intimate relationship. While “Imaginings” examined home, work, and family in the context of Edith and Frieda’s visions, designs, and hopes for their imagined future, “Realities” looks at what actually transpired for the two women in terms of home, work and family.

Edith’s and Frieda’s desires collided with the realities of family obligations, the challenges women faced in relation to work, and the difficulties of finding affordable housing, all of which developed against the backdrop of Depression Toronto in the 1930s and wartime Toronto in the 1940s. What resulted of the collision, however, was not the defeat of the two women’s dreams and hopes, but a gradual reworking of those hopes that became manifest in their home, their work, and their family.

### **Home**

Frieda and Edith believed that sacrifices were necessary in order to accommodate

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<sup>58</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 20 September 1927, File 09, Box 010, FFPR.

their lives as an intimate same-sex couple to the realities of their world. When making choices such as where to live, when and how to live together, and whether to raise children, economic constraints and the reactions of their families and friends remained a constant consideration. Furthermore, after Frieda returned to Toronto in 1927, the discussion regarding the adoption of children did not resurface. The two women postponed living together until it was economically and professionally prudent.

Edith and Frieda were not immune from the residential changes brought on by the Depression. The City of Toronto Directory in 1930 noted that “present conditions with their attendant effect on the city” had forced one-third of all families to move and often led them to double up in their residences.<sup>59</sup> Frieda, alongside increasing numbers of women, came to Toronto looking for work. Edith, having returned to Toronto in 1927, lived with her mother. The same year, when Frieda accepted a research position at the University of Toronto, she was expected to live with her mother, but she did not.

Frieda’s brother Donald was supportive of his sister in contravening their mother’s expectations, which evidently weighed heavily upon Frieda. His support was a relief:

The rest of the time was occupied in ferrying myself across to Don’s where D. and M.[Maurice McPhedran a family friend] and presently mother joined me and we hung around until train-time. Don took me down and was sweet to me- he said flatly that he didn’t see why I should live with mother if it didn’t do. That he wouldn’t feel compelled to etc.<sup>60</sup>

Despite Frieda’s success in not having to live with her mother, accepting the Toronto position was a decision that guaranteed that the two women would not be living together,

<sup>59</sup> The preface in Toronto Directory of 1930 noted that there were 200,000 changes out of a population of 856,618. City Directory 1930, City of Toronto Archives.

<sup>60</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 March 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

at least not right away. Frieda wrote:

Immediately on accepting this job I went home and very nearly burst into tears at the prospect. Intellectually I'm convinced it was the thing to do but I wish it weren't. God help us lambie, or, if not, I think He at least approves. I don't know whether it was sound or not we will doubtless see.<sup>61</sup>

If Frieda felt she could not live with Edith, she at least lived nearby. When Frieda came back to Toronto in 1927, she roomed with her brother Don at 175 Lowther Rd., near Prince Arthur and St. George St., while Edith lived at her family's Balmoral Ave. residence near Avenue Rd. and Eglinton. Less than three kilometers apart, the women were a 30 minute walk from each other. Indeed, all of Frieda's subsequent residences were close to Edith's family residence. In 1929, Donald bought his home at 7 Wychwood Park, near St. Clair and Christie, while Frieda moved to The Clarendon Apartments on Avenue Rd, only half a kilometer from Edith's house. A year later, in 1930, Frieda moved to 114 Hudson Dr., at St. Clair and Mount Pleasant, still a half hour's walk from Edith's, where she resided for the next seven years.<sup>62</sup> Because Edith and Frieda lived so close to each other, they did not maintain their written correspondence. The correspondence resumed when Edith moved out of the city.

In 1933, acting on economic need and her wish to farm, Edith moved permanently to the land she had inherited in Aurora. She and her mother lived more cheaply in the country while renting out their Balmoral Ave. family home. Over the next four years, until Edith entered Veterinary College, she combined work and family during her weekend sojourns in Toronto. On most weekends, Frieda and Edith lived together at

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<sup>61</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 14 March 1927, File 12, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>62</sup> City Directory, 1930, City of Toronto Archives.

Frieda's home and Edith sold her farm's produce in the city.

For several years, Edith's dream of a large home that housed Frieda and their children was not the reality of their lives. Economics and family and social obligations dictated another kind of life for the two women. They were not in a position to purchase a house, have children, and find nearby employment for Frieda. Yet the two women managed to make the outward shape of their lives come a little closer to their written desires. They were able to see each other regularly and they were able to live together as a couple on weekends.

### **Work**

Historical interpretations regarding Canadian working women's experience of the Depression are born out in the correspondence of Frieda and Edith. One historical argument in particular is that during the 1930s anti-feminist discourse shaped the labour market and national employment policies. This was manifested in more severe economic difficulties for working women and their families. In studies of Canadian national employment rates and social policy, historians have found that sexism kept women's wages below men's wages, limited women's job options, and denied married women paid work regardless of need.<sup>63</sup>

Even though Edith's and Frieda's letters provided evidence of systemic sexism connected with their efforts to find professional livelihoods, the two women did not acknowledge the connection between their genders and their socioeconomic challenges.

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<sup>63</sup> Margaret Hobbs, "Equality and Difference: Feminism and the Defence of Women Workers During the Great Depression," *Labour/leTravail* 32 (Fall 1993), 201-203; Katrina Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-Era City, 1929-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: the Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995)

They felt that any success they achieved was due to personal achievement and good fortune. Frieda considered herself fortunate to have obtained a position as a researcher/lecturer at the University of Toronto, despite the prospect of a slow professional ascent for a female. Edith saw herself lucky to have been bequeathed a farm and to have finally been accepted to Veterinary College in 1937.<sup>64</sup>

Historian Katrina Srigley's interviews with women who worked outside the home during the Great Depression addresses the same phenomenon. Women of the Depression were reluctant to acknowledge any systemic sexism. Srigley's interviewees were conscious of the derision that could be leveled at "career women" and spinsters, but none claimed they personally suffered animosity for the fact that they worked.<sup>65</sup>

Edith experienced the derision mentioned by Srigley's interviewees. And she was also a victim of the larger antifeminist discourse leveled at working women and women with money. The reality of Edith's existence as a woman who owned and worked her own farm was inextricably bound up with the realities of wider perceptions of her as a single woman. On a cold dark December evening in 1934, Edith was verbally accosted by a group of men while doing charity work outside a movie theatre.

How Edith came to be there and the manner in which she recounted what happened offers us some insight into how she perceived herself in the community and how the community perceived her. In addition, the manner of the verbal assault,

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<sup>64</sup> Srigley notes that in 1931 in Ontario women earned an average of \$636 annually, while men earned \$1,105. Ten years later, in 1941 women earned an average of \$547 annually while men earned \$1,112. 84% of single women were employed. Katrina Srigley "Working Lives and Simple Pleasures: Single, Employed Women in Depression-Era City, 1929-1939" (Ph.D. diss. University of Toronto, 2005), 136.

<sup>65</sup> Both Srigley and Hobbs agree on the voluminous level of antifeminist sentiment disseminated in the popular culture of newspapers, advertisements, comics, and magazine articles. Srigley, "Working Lives and Simple Pleasures," 73.

accompanied by Edith's account of it, provides us with more understanding of

Depression-era anti-feminist discourse on a personal level.

In a letter that described the verbal assault, Edith recounted how she was regarded within her farm community. She found amusing the community's employment of her nickname "Bud." To make her point, she sent Frieda a list of the women who were taking the door receipts at a charity movie event:

Mrs. Robinson is in charge 8:30-11:30 am. Miss Eve Lenin in charge 11:30-2:30 pm. Bud Williams in charge 6:30-9:30 pm.<sup>66</sup>

Edith thus wrote that the women of the community referred to her in the timetable as "Bud," while the other women at the door were listed as "Miss" or "Mrs." In fact, Edith referred to herself as Bud, but she was surprised when the women of the community did the same. Why? And why did "Bud" have the late shift?

Edith was a lone female farmer holding an occupation socially coded as masculine. She did not have a male partner and her nickname Bud was gendered as masculine. In light of this, the women's group proposed Edith for the most dangerous shift of the farm-women's charity event. Edith wrote:

I found that I was becoming[word unclear] the evening job and also that I was considered that suitable person to leave outside that movie when the second show went in – all the other boxes[cash receipts] had to be in the Town Hall by 8:30. Considering all that was said about us young girls being out at night, I thought a "married lady" would be more suitable but they evidently felt that my morals were quite safe and my coat was thickest, so I stayed.<sup>67</sup>

This passage hints at a myriad of perceptions of women during these years. First, the

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<sup>66</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 3 December 1934, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>67</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 3 December 1934, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

women's group thought that Edith was the most suitable person to place in charge of receipts in the late evening. A thirty-five-year old woman with her own farm was likely honest and good with money. As a single thirty-five year old woman with a thick coat and no family, she was also seen as the most suitable to withstand the December night cold and manage the late hour. The community women likely viewed Edith as a mature woman who was dependable, if only for the reason that a woman with the moniker "Bud" could take care of herself. In terms of "morality," with the thickest coat, ownership of her own farm, and no children at home, Edith would be less likely to be tempted to pocket any of the receipts out of dire need.

Edith, however, revealed her concern about the public perception of her sexual morals in light of her marital status. In this paragraph she envisioned her public persona as one of "us young girls" because she was "single." Edith had connected single womanhood with youth and married womanhood with age. In noting to Frieda that "I thought a 'married lady' would be more suitable," Edith was evidently indicating that she was taken aback at the committee's decision to appoint a single woman and not a "married lady."<sup>68</sup>

After this, Edith wrote about her experience of being accosted:

When a horrid mob of McCarthy's and their friends came, I was glad I was alone. Their remarks about my morals were broad to say the least. And they warned the movie people that I was a thug in disguise waiting to rob the box office!<sup>69</sup>

Edith recorded her sense of what happened to her on two levels. The first was in connection to the assailants' perception of her morality, which had potentially sexual

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<sup>68</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 3 December 1934, File 10, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Ibid.*

implications. The second related to their perception of her as a thug and thief. Edith did not write what “McCarthy’s and their friends” said to her, but she noted that she was glad that she was alone so as not to be publicly embarrassed.<sup>70</sup> Her embarrassment was related at least in part to the accusations of having questionable morals. As Edith stated that these morality-based epithets were broad, we can assume that the accusations hinted at more than just thievery. They may have referenced non-marital sex, prostitution, lesbianism, female masculinity, or a combination of all of these. This might be one reason for Edith’s relief that there were no witnesses to what might have been a shaming experience. Nevertheless, the fact that these men singled out Edith speaks volumes to the daily difficulties experienced by women who stepped out of prescribed notions of gender and sexuality.<sup>71</sup> Edith faced even more difficulties upon her return to college.

### **Professional Dreams Realized; Professional Realities Encountered**

After almost ten years of raising chickens and pigs on her farm in Aurora in 1937 and years of making applications for admission, Edith was accepted into the Ontario Veterinary College. The College, in 1931, had only recently opened up their doors to women and Edith was the only woman in her class of 60. Edith Williams and fellow alumni Jean Rumney, in A Century of Challenge: A History of the Ontario Veterinary College, recalled their admission interviews with the college’s principal, Dr. McGilvray. Both women noted that McGilvray was not interested in women applicants but they

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<sup>70</sup> Author’s note: what is meant by the word ‘McCarthy’s’ is unknown. My assumption is that McCarthy was a local pejorative for young male Irish Catholic ruffian.

<sup>71</sup> Srigley documents the sensational case of Ruth Taylor, a young single woman who was brutally murdered in November 1926. Her crime was that she came home late from her job at a bank.



expressed confidence that, despite the College's blatant sexism, McGilvray fought in support of their application, which he did.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the small number of women who graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College, like their medical counterparts, believed that the College did not discriminate in its admission policy. They believed that their successful application was based on individual merit, considering that hundreds of applications were denied.<sup>73</sup> Nine years after Edith graduated, Dr. Joan Budd (nee Belcher '50), one of three female graduates in a class of 124,<sup>74</sup> noted that opinions concerning OVC's objections to women in the profession "are figments of the immature mind."<sup>75</sup> Notably, Edith was the second woman in Canada and the fifth in North America to graduate as a veterinarian. During the decade of Edith's attendance, Dr. G. E. Fritz of Silver Creek New York in 1934 and Dr. Jean Rumney of Hamilton Ontario in 1939 were the first women to graduate from the Ontario Veterinary College.<sup>76</sup>

The OVC's reluctance to accepting women in veterinary medicine was not uncommon in institutions of higher education during these decades. Moreover, the years during which Edith completed her training as a veterinarian were not kind to women who studied or taught in fields outside of home economics. After World War II, when state policy was directed towards a "return to normal," higher education remained male dominated. In the academic world before 1950, only three women in Canada received

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<sup>72</sup> F. Eugene Gattinger, *A Century of Challenge: A History of the Ontario Veterinary College* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 98.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* The year Edith was accepted 222 applicants were denied and the following year 350 qualified applications were refused.

<sup>74</sup> Convocation Roles for the University of Toronto, 1950, University of Toronto Archives.

<sup>75</sup> Gattinger, 98.

<sup>76</sup> *Torontoensis*, the University of Toronto Yearbook: 1939; 1940; 1941; and 1942, University of Toronto Archives.

regular appointments in Canadian university history departments. One of these appointments, Professor Margaret Ormsby, was assigned a woman's washroom as her office at McMaster University. The climate remained chilly. While at the University of Guelph in 1961, Professor Helen Abell described her experience as "outright hostility to women professors." At the University of Guelph, of which the OVC was a part, office nameplates for female professors indicated marital status (Miss or Mrs.) rather than professional standing, a practice carried into the 1970s.<sup>77</sup>

The very pedagogy of veterinary medicine was imbued with chauvinism. Edith, as the one woman in her class, was sorely outnumbered. Her choice of specialization in small animal medicine was also gendered. The field of large animal medicine carried the connotation of "real" veterinary work and thus was the "masculine" aspect of veterinary science. To be a "small animal" man was seldom an acknowledged aspiration of manly veterinary graduates. Principal McGilvray, a specialist in large animal medicine, did not contain his disdain for small animal medicine or what he called the "the pooch and pussy business." In 1938 he wrote,

Veterinarians should keep out of the pup and kitten business and my sympathy is with those who devote the knowledge of their professions to something more important to assisting farmers in the livestock industry. Dogs are gaining in public favour, and vets are turning away from livestock practice to small animal practice owing to the fact that the latter is more remunerative. I do not wish to create the impression that the O.V.C. is likewise inclined.

The macho masculine image was reflected in McGilvray's right hand man, Dr. McIntosh, who was head of large animal medicine. F. Eugene Gattinger describes Dr. McIntosh

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<sup>77</sup> Alexander M. Ross and Terry Crowley, *The College on the Hill: A New History of the OAC, 1984-1999* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999), 150.

teaching his students while “seated on an upturned keg cigar in mouth battered hat pushed to back of his head as he sutured ruptures in a seemingly endless stream of little pigs which farmers brought in for repairs.”<sup>78</sup> Most graduates of Edith’s year opted for large animal medicine, as evidenced in her college yearbook.<sup>79</sup>

Edith’s college yearbook provides more clues about the College’s unrestrained chauvinism. One young graduate was known as “Casanova.” Another had “foxy ambitions.” One was interested in “finding a chain store debutante,” while another had “nurse fever.” Given that these were war years and that some of these graduates had been fighting overseas, those who were soldiers posed in uniforms.<sup>80</sup> In her yearbook statement Edith maintained her distance from her male colleagues and described herself as preferring small animals. She stated that she “loves dogs.” The note read as follows: “Attended Glen Mawr Ladies’ School and University of Toronto. Has traveled Europe. Loves dogs. Was lab assistant during summers.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Gattinger, 98-99.

<sup>79</sup> Torontoensis Yearbook: 41, University of Toronto Archives.

<sup>80</sup> Torontoensis Yearbook: 37; 38; 39; 40; 41; 42, University of Toronto Archives.

<sup>81</sup> Torontoensis: 41, Ontario Veterinary College Records, University of Toronto Archives.



Edith, however, was reluctant to acknowledge her gender as an issue. She wrote to Frieda after her first day September 4, 1937:

My Darling: It has been a nice day. Most of this morning was spent in being told that if we all hadn't come here because we thought we would enjoy a lifetime of this work, we'd better go home now; if we were afraid of animals and didn't like them, we would be no good, if we didn't want to work hard there was no sense wasting their time and ours. We were also taught how to use a microscope. In the afternoon, we saw barns and animals to get the general layout and then given a list of books to go out and buy. The other female vet hasn't turned up yet, but they are quite kind to me.<sup>82</sup>

Only at the end of this letter did Edith make clear that she was the only woman in the class. In the next account, written a year later from Guelph's Agricultural College, Edith revealed her criticism of another woman who had attempted to enter her class. Embedded in the criticism was a sexist assumption that because the new student was a woman she had a weak stomach. Edith seemed jealous that there was another woman in her class:

Another of the first years at OAC (Ontario Agricultural College) thought it would be nice to transfer to us next year, so Jean [Rumney] brought her over to see

<sup>82</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 4 September 1937, File 11, Box 010, FFPR.

things today - I don't think she will come now. There was a very messy horse operation and then our work was stinking to say the least. She is a Greta Garbo looking creature - short long straight hair and looks very disillusioned. After she had left the lab, one of the boys said, "We don't want her over here - all she is interested in is us -not the animals!" Which I thought was quite bright of them. And their nickname for her is "Aggie-Pants". Darling I must go to bed. I wish you were here, but I am not having a darling time!<sup>83</sup>

Why was Edith so critical of a female comrade? Any woman who wanted to be taken seriously in higher education constantly tailored her wardrobe. For example, Professor Helen Abell of the University of Guelph was called "mannish" by her colleagues in the mid-sixties because she chose to dress in tailored suits. Indeed, single academic women in tailored suits risked suspicions of lesbianism.<sup>84</sup>

The reasons for Edith's position were complicated. She was part of an older generation of women for whom skirts in public were less of an option. As a "devoted woman," Edith was no doubt sensitive to accusations of "lesbianism" and so dissociated herself from the woman in her class who wore pants. By the late 1930s the suspicion of "lesbianism" was a difficult social stigma to bear. Edith may have felt that she needed to affirm her place in class as "one of the boys." And as "one of the boys," she could hope to be respected and treated as such. It was to her academic advantage to side with the males in the room.

Edith might have experienced difficult times because of her age and chauvinism in veterinary school, but outside the college walls the situation was different. She was struck almost immediately by the advantages she possessed as an older female veterinarian. Only two months after beginning classes in Guelph, Edith wrote:

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<sup>83</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, early September 1938, File 11, Box 010, FFPR.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander M. Ross and Terry Crowley, *The College on the Hill*, 150.

Darling-

I had a funny experience today. Yesterday a Mrs. Seymour called me up and said that her dog was sick and what should she do about it - would I come down and see it? I simply gasped and explained that I was not really the person to see sick dogs but what about the clinic. She said that she had seen me out walking with Nips and/or Linda in my case and thought that I had looked kind or pleasant or something of that sort so she had enquired, found out where I lived and wanted to consult me. Isn't that a strange way to behave?<sup>85</sup>

Edith continued,

I spoke to Dr. Cody the small animal man about it and he said "If you can pick up patients like that, I'll give you a partnership the minute you graduate!" Do you think that I better accept now? But Guelph is too far from Toronto.<sup>86</sup>

This suggests that Edith's position as a female veterinarian placed her in an advantageous position when dealing with pet owners, many of whom were also women. Edith's age, at forty years old, might also have given clients the impression that she had been in the veterinary business for a while. Because so many pet owners were women, they likely felt that another woman veterinarian might be more familiar to the animal as a care provider. Furthermore, as a woman, Edith easily cultivated other women clients in casual social associations (such as visiting for tea) without any fears of sexual impropriety.

Edith began her internship in Montreal one month after her graduation in October 1941. Interning at the small family-run "Westmount Animal Hospital," Edith wrote about having an enjoyable internship and being regarded as a novelty:

They (Dr. Halloway and his brother) also have 2 good kennel boys who look on me as a sort of freak and show me off to the patients' owners with a great flourish! I have already done much more surgery—all simple things like cutting tails, and castrating cats, but lots of it, and it makes you handy with the tools. Halloway has much more sense than any small animal man I have seen so far.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 November 1937, Box 010, File 11, FFPR.

<sup>86</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 November 1937, Box 010, File 11, FFPR.

<sup>87</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 30 November 1941, File 12, Box 010, FFPR.

Frieda answered Edith's letter:

I hope you are having a profitable time in Montreal. Don't wear yourself out. Your practice here is missing you.<sup>88</sup>

Edith continued to be happy with her placement:

It was a nice place to work and the man knows something. All dogs that die are P.M.-ed [post-mortemed] if we can get permission even if they have to be sewed up again for burial. Also anything I want to practice is allowed - and any amount of help is given. Halloway is doing the whole medical course if he can arrange.<sup>89</sup>

Ultimately, Edith's dream of a career was realized and her connection to Frieda was strengthened by joining with Frieda as a professional. By this time, both women were older and more confident in their intimate partnership. In 1941, Edith began practicing veterinary medicine at St. Clair and Avenue Rd. and finally lived full-time with Frieda.

### **Family Realized**

In 1941, Edith and Frieda were both 43 years old and living together in their rented home on 30 Heathdale Rd., near Bathurst and St. Clair Avenue in Toronto. Heathdale was close to Frieda's work at the University of Toronto and very close to Edith's Veterinary clinic at 675 St. Clair Ave. W. Frieda's mother died in 1937, which freed her from one set of family obligations.

During World War II, Frieda and Edith were among the many who volunteered their homes as refuges for British children who were sent to Canada for safety by their parents. In 1941 Jenny Rodd, who was eleven years old, was placed with Edith and

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<sup>88</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 29 November 1941, File 13, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>89</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 30 November 1941, File 12, Box 010, FFPR.

Frieda who referred to their charge as their niece. After the war was over, Jenny returned to England to live with her own parents, but she remained in contact with the Frasers. In England, Jenny eventually met and married a Canadian. The couple returned to live in Canada. Jenny remained part of the Fraser family and named her firstborn daughter after Frieda.

The fact that Edith and Frieda offered their home as a refuge for wartime British children reflected their patriotism as well as their desire for a child in their lives. And in the dark years of 1941, there was a real possibility that Jenny might never return to England. For the duration of the war, the three maintained a family life that included work, school, report cards, golfing, skating, and weekends spent at the family farm in Burlington, Ontario. Though there are few letters from these years, the ones that were written portray a happy family life.

In one November letter, Frieda painted a warm domestic winter scene. In light of the women's dreams of the late 1920s the familial images are poignant:

Jenny and I have had a quiet afternoon and evening in the home. Photographs of J. viewed, a list made of those needed, outline of J.'s hand for Mrs. W. and letter, tree and garage climbing to set out suet for the birds, more tree climbing for pleasure, collecting a little witch-hazel for Alta, planting parsley in two pots, digging one side of the front garden to plant the rest of the parsley. Then shopping by me and homework by J., listening to the radio to pick out musical instruments and the time in which they were playing. Painting the chest of drawers, setting up the bed in the s. room and finishing the chest while J. went to bed. Tomorrow I think we go to Burlington to see how things are.<sup>90</sup>

It is impossible to know from this letter the state of Frieda and Mrs. Williams's relationship, but the fact that Frieda had Jenny draw an outline of her hand for Mrs.

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<sup>90</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 29 November 1941, File 13, Box 036, FFPR.



Williams indicated that the women maintained their family connections. A few months later in January 1942, Frieda wrote in a motherly way about her ward's grades:

Jenny's report has come. Thank goodness we won't hear any more about that for a while. She is 2nd in the class. A boy was 3 marks higher out of 820 something. The individual subjects are about as she thought. It is a pity she thinks so much about marks, ranking, winning in games and so forth.<sup>91</sup>

Frieda, as a medical doctor and a professor at the University of Toronto, indicated that she wanted Jenny to learn that there was a lot more to life than academic excellence, but this letter suggests that Jenny was a high achiever, not unlike her "aunt" Frieda. Edith also enjoyed the domestic family routine, writing a year later to Frieda, who was away for a few days:

Dearest: The house isn't nearly as nice without you--Leonie [Dr. Leonie Farrell—a research chemist who shared their accommodation] spent the weekend with her sister, so Jenny and I were alone most of the time – Jenny did very well and brought me up a very nice supper when Mrs. Malvin [the housekeeper] was out. Jenny liked the postcard, and it made her feel very important being the only person to hear from you.<sup>92</sup>

From this letter it is evident that Jenny cared for her aunts a great deal. And having an important role at a critical time in Jenny's life added a deeper dimension to the lives of Edith and Frieda. Moreover, Jenny never lost her emotional connection to her guardians. Fifty-seven years later in a 1998 letter, Jenny noted with some sadness that she had not known about the nature of the relationship between Edith and Frieda. Thus as much as Jenny might have sensed her aunts' intimacy, it was not discussed, during the war or after. In her letter Jenny wrote,

I read it [their letters] with much interest and some sadness, for what Frieda and

<sup>91</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, 24 January 1942, File 13, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>92</sup> Edith Williams to Frieda Fraser, 25 February 1943, File 12, Box 010, FFPR.

Bud went through in the twenties. I had no idea of what went on in the twenties—it was never alluded to. It was also very interesting to see Frieda express her feelings on paper; in the 1940s she was very austere—even her lawyer, a great big strapping man, a few years younger than Frieda, said that he was always a little afraid of her. Bud was always warm and outgoing, and our family adored her.<sup>93</sup>

When questioned later about what she meant by her sadness, Jenny wrote,

I had absolutely no understanding of sex when I moved in with Frieda and Bud. I was 12 going on 13 and just entering High School (Vaughan Rd.) when I started living at 30 Heathdale Rd. What I learned about their relationship was that they were just very good friends. I never saw any kind of physical affection between them they just liked each other.<sup>94</sup>

The reasons for this are multiple. Edith and Frieda would have reasonably feared that if Jenny explicitly knew about the nature of her aunts' relationship and shared that knowledge with others, she could have been taken away from them—homosexuals, after all, were seen as dangerous to children and unsuitable parents. Edith would be risking her veterinary practice and Frieda would be putting her teaching position at the University of Toronto in jeopardy. Given the indeterminate length of Jenny's stay and the increasing homophobia in the cultural climate of World War II, the two women had a great deal invested in discretion.

During the 1940s, in Canada and the United States, same-sex sexuality was seldom discussed in public and if it was referred to, it was presented as a form of sexual deviancy. As American historian Allan Berube points out, there were only a few tragic novels with characters called "sexual inverters." In the cities, Berube notes, like-minded women and men often formed private social circles, as evidenced in the Fraser/Williams correspondence, or they patronized small numbers of gay bars and nightclubs. Despite the

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<sup>93</sup> Jenny (Jane) Rodd, Letter to author, 2 September 1998, author's collection.

<sup>94</sup> Jenny(Jane) Rodd, Letter to author, 25 February 2014, author's collection.

pronounced public silence on the “love that dare not speak its name,” gay and lesbian culture expanded in Canada and the United States as an effect of massive mobilization for World War II. Social constraints in the two countries had relaxed, as suggested by Berube and Canadian historian Paul Jackson. Both historians acknowledge that the Second World War was a period of interruption of social norms and destabilization of the family. Unprecedented numbers of women entered into the paid labour force in wartime production and as Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile note “more queers came out.”<sup>95</sup> Mobilization for war meant that women and men with same-sex desires had more opportunity to come to terms with their sexuality. Many men and women, gathered together in large homosocial environments found the war experience to be a time of sexual self-discovery. Indeed, as Jackson notes, “many gay veterans remembered these years as a period of personal growth.”<sup>96</sup> The military experience in both countries was, for many gay men and lesbians, as described by Berube, “an experience in which they fell in love, made friends with other gay people, and fueled the expansion of gay culture in war-boom cities.”<sup>97</sup> Thus in Canada and the United States, the early years of the 1940s were characterized by the mobilization for war, the establishment of gay culture in war-boom cities, and by opportunities for sexual self-discovery.

The continuing development of modern lesbian identity and culture also benefitted from military policies during wartime. American historian Leisa Meyer and Kinsman and Gentile, for example, note that policies in the women’s army corps that

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<sup>95</sup> Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2010), 23.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Jackson, *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University, 2004), 17.

<sup>97</sup> Berube, 6,7.

identified sexual deviancy and heterosexual promiscuity were mediated by the need to maintain favourable public perceptions of women in the military.<sup>98</sup> Avoiding public scrutiny was important to women's military organizations because, while men's claim to (heterosexual) masculinity was reinforced in joining the military, women who joined the military compromised their claim to (heterosexual) femininity.<sup>99</sup> Thus, wary of allusions to lesbianism from their inceptions, the WAC and Canadian Women's Army Corps emphasized "proper" feminine appearance and asexual behaviour of those in their ranks. Lesbians, in particular, were identified by masculine behaviour/appearance and allegations of same-sex sex. As a result, Meyer notes, the military singled out the working-class butch woman as the public symbol of the social/sexual category lesbian while often tolerating "romantic middle-class friendships."<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, women's army divisions were relatively lenient in their regard for behaviour and appearance that suggested sexual deviance.<sup>101</sup> In the United States, only the most "visible" lesbians drew attention and few women were discharged for homosexuality.<sup>102</sup> Measures to redirect sexual deviancy included prohibitions against women dancing together, personal guidance, the shifting of personnel, changing room assignments, and transfers. In Canada, despite official proscriptions against homosexuality there were no court martials nor specific investigations into lesbianism during the war years.<sup>103</sup> Most importantly, as suggested by Meyer, the definition of the working-class butch woman as the social/sexual

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<sup>98</sup> Leisa Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University, 1996), 149-178; Kinsman and Gentile, 63.

<sup>99</sup> Meyer, 151.

<sup>100</sup> Meyer, 152.

<sup>101</sup> Meyer, 158.

<sup>102</sup> Kinsman and Gentile, 65; Berube, 210.

<sup>103</sup> Kinsman and Gentile, 62.

category of lesbian, as promulgated by military organizations during World War II, “was a significant factor in the emergence of a modern lesbian identity and contributed to continuing development of a lesbian culture both within and outside the military.”<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless gay men and lesbians confronted major challenges in the context of World War II.

The Canadian military and the American military had proscriptions against “homosexual indecency.” Moreover, the expansion of gay and lesbian life during the war was accompanied by the military’s efforts to expand anti-homosexual policies. Gay men were vulnerable to discipline, court-martial, or imprisonment and as the war progressed both Canadian and American armed forces developed more extensive policing and surveillance. By 1941, the military screening program, informed by the American Psychiatric Association, located discussions of homosexuality and effeminacy in the category of psychiatric disorders.<sup>105</sup> Thus the military promulgated the conviction based on psychiatry that homosexuals were morally lax, disruptive, and sexually deviant—not representative of a heterosexually defined masculinity. As Jackson notes, “Queers did not exist among the real men who saved the world from fascism.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed to many heterosexual people, homosexuality was accompanied by all kinds of sexual depravity imaginable, including the molestation of children. In this context, lives were devastated because of the military’s efforts to root out homosexuals in their ranks. Homosexuals in the army were at risk of physical attacks and ostracism. Many committed suicide, as

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<sup>104</sup> Leisa Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University, 1996) 149-178.

<sup>105</sup> Berube, 12.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson, 7.

Jackson writes, “when they could no longer bear the psychic burden of ostracism for their sexual deviance.” Additionally, gay men were vulnerable to what Jackson terms, a psychic invasion as military psychiatrists attempted to kill their desire.<sup>107</sup> Berube notes that men who were suspected of homosexuality were held in the psychiatric wards of military hospitals before discharge.<sup>108</sup> Despite the fact that many servicemen and women were tolerant of homosexuality at the service level, for many, the experience of being gay in the army during the Second World War was a traumatic experience that lasted a lifetime.<sup>109</sup> And as Berube notes, “gay males and lesbians discovered that they were fighting two wars one for America, democracy, and freedom and the other, for survival as homosexuals within military organizations.”<sup>110</sup>

While World War II can be viewed as a period of social disruption that furthered the development of lesbian and gay identity, the years that followed encompassed Cold War discourses that vilified gays and lesbians, but nevertheless these years also witnessed gay and lesbian challenges to those discourses.<sup>111</sup>

Postwar discourse emphasized policies that favoured whiteness, patriarchal family structure, heterosexuality, and “proper” forms of masculinity and femininity. These relations, Kinsman and Gentile write, were “integral aspects of Western capitalism.” Thus in order to preserve western capitalism against communism it was in the interest of

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<sup>107</sup> Jackson, 17.

<sup>108</sup> Berube, 210.

<sup>109</sup> Jackson, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Berube, 7.

<sup>111</sup> Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2010), 54.

national security to re-establish and re-affirm these relations.<sup>112</sup> Homosexuals in the military and defense organizations represented the greatest risk to national security because by the end of the war, Berube notes, homosexuals were believed to be unfit for service, unable to control their passions, and unsuitable to parent, and that homosexuals constituted a threat to national security. Moreover, they were believed to be susceptible to blackmail by communists, or had become communists themselves. This belief was dramatically demonstrated in the early 1950s, when U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy placed North America's fears of communism and homosexuals on the public stage.<sup>113</sup> As a result, the military policy of rooting out homosexuals was extended to the entire federal government and into state and local governments, spreading to every level of employment. The legal right to refuse employment and or fire anyone suspected of homosexual behaviour affected at least one-fifth of the American workforce. Moreover, gay and lesbian bars had become the targets of repeated raids during which gays and lesbians were subject to mass arrests. Not immune from the McCarthy tirade nor fears of communists and homosexuals, Canada had its own anti-homosexual policy that was influenced, in part, by the America's CIA- driven campaign. Homosexuals were a threat to national security because they lacked sound judgment, possessed cowardice, were easily pressured, and were generally unstable. Lesbians, in particular, were depicted as sexual threats in addition to jeopardizing social stability.<sup>114</sup> Anti-homosexual proceedings were conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in secrecy using

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<sup>112</sup> Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, 23.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, "Popular Sociology, Reading and Coming Out" in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, ed. Kathy Peiss (New York: Houghton Mifflin 2002), 395.

<sup>114</sup> Kinsman and Gentile, 8, 62.

information gathered from undercover operations that included photo surveillance, networks of informants, and interrogations. All of this happened without grounds for appeal. Hundreds of lesbians, gay men and others lost their jobs, and their military careers and were demoted to less sensitive positions in the post-war purges.<sup>115</sup> Places where lesbians and gay men congregated were subject to regular raids and city by-laws were enacted that restricted bar service and enforced “gender appropriate” clothing. Moreover, lesbians and gay men were arrested and brutalized by police, sometimes including sexual assault.<sup>116</sup> The actions of government and local authorities had profound effects upon general public perceptions of gays and lesbians in Canada and the United States, as well as affecting how gays and lesbians perceived themselves. Facing criminalization and social stigmatization, lesbians and gays lived vulnerable lives. They often lived double lives in order to keep their jobs, positions, community connections, and families. Many, in the process, internalized the hatred that was directed at them.<sup>117</sup> And as Berube notes, with scant legal and organizational support, many gays and lesbians were afraid to talk about themselves in public or fight back.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, the gay positive changes that had been set in motion by Second World War continued and even expanded into the 1950s, and significantly, the work of political activism began.

In the United States, as a response to anti-homosexual purges, the first openly gay organization, The Mattachine Society, and a few years later the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian rights organization, both published their own magazines that expressed gay and

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<sup>115</sup> Kinsman and Gentile, 23.

<sup>116</sup> Elise Chenier, “Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture: Living ‘The Gay Life’ in Toronto, 1955-1965,” *Left History* 9, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 85-112.

<sup>117</sup> Berube, 270.

<sup>118</sup> Berube, 268-270.



lesbian culture while at the same time promoted the notion that homosexuals were an oppressed minority.<sup>119</sup> Alfred Kinsey's study of male and female sexual behaviour brought homosexuality into the public discourse in a new way. Its findings that homosexuality was more common than ever challenged perceptions of deviancy, criminality, and mental illness that had become associated with homosexuals.<sup>120</sup> In urban areas, fueled by postwar prosperity, gay bars continued to serve as locations of gay community and the expansion of gay networks continued. Despite increased local surveillance, threats of arrests and police brutality, gay men and lesbians, by developing their networks, expanded the gay closet. Even though gay bars in Canada and the United States were subject to frequent raids, the publication of these actions aided in the gay bars' publicity. Moreover, many gay men and lesbians co-operated with each other in ways that circumvented various urban liquor and by-law regulations that stipulated the appearance of heterosexuality.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, gays and lesbians could congregate in hotels and restaurants with reputations for being "gay friendly." Many middle class lesbians preferred to connect within the safety of business and professional organizations. Additionally during this decade, many North American cities had locations in their cities in which gay men and lesbians tended to frequent. Here they could live, socialize, spend their money, and develop a communal identity.<sup>122</sup> Thus, as a result of the postwar upheaval and despite concerted efforts to curtail homosexual behaviour, more cities

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<sup>119</sup> Berube,

<sup>120</sup> Berube, 260.

<sup>121</sup> Elise Chenier, 88.

<sup>122</sup> Marc Stein, in his study on gays and lesbians in Philadelphia, discusses the popularity of Spruce Street in Philadelphia's for gays and lesbians in 1950s Philadelphia. *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000), 22. Interestingly Frieda lived on Spruce Street in 1927, when she completed her residency in Philadelphia.

across America and Canada accommodated the growth of an urban gay subculture that not only endured, but in some places flourished throughout the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>123</sup>

What were the lasting effects of these decades upon Edith and Frieda who, as devoted women, raised a young child for a few years during the war? Historian Daniel Rivers notes that these were dangerous years for gay men and lesbians with children. Even though Rivers' exploration documents lesbian and gay families' experiences in the United States, the Canadian experience of homophobia was likely not much different. In an era where the middle class nuclear family model was depicted by media images and political voices to be female homemakers with male breadwinners, lesbian and gay parents were characterized as deviants with no right to raise children. Moreover, many heterosexual people believed that lesbians and gay men were psychologically prone to molesting children.<sup>124</sup> As Rivers notes, "lesbian and gay parents lived their everyday lives with the threat of exposure and its dire consequences." Thus if Edith and Frieda wanted Jenny in their lives for the duration of the war, they needed to negotiate their desire with what Rivers describes as the "realities of a culture of heterosexual postwar domesticity."<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, to ensure that Jenny had a happy school and social life, Edith and Frieda likely kept the nature of their relationship and their past from Jenny to shield her from the social stigma that she might have encountered at school. Indeed, Rivers relates poignant stories of disheartened children of lesbians who, growing up in the 1940s and

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<sup>123</sup> Kinsman and Gentile, 102.

<sup>124</sup> Berube, 258.

<sup>125</sup> Daniel Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2013), 12, 52. Drawing on court transcripts Rivers notes that Judges believed that gay fathers and lesbian mothers would molest their children.

1950s, were severely ostracized by their community when their mothers' lesbianism became public. Cancelled play dates and sparsely attended birthday parties were stark examples of the ostracism experienced by the children raised by women and men who were perceived by their community as lesbian and/or gay. One young woman who grew up in the 1940s and was aware of her mother's lesbianism was warned by her mother "to be careful, and that her family was looked down on by American heterosexuals."<sup>126</sup> In her few years of living with Edith and Frieda, Jenny was spared any possible social ostracism, but this was accompanied with some loss. During the war and particularly in the years that followed, Edith and Frieda felt that they could never share the full history of their intimacy. The two women, who shared their home with a child for a few years, were constrained about sharing their hearts with that child for decades.

In light of the culture of homophobia of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, one can understand how two women in a same-sex intimate partnership had a great deal invested in the privacy surrounding their personal lives. Edith and Frieda's practiced ambiguity, accompanied by a World War and Cold War culture of hyper-heterosexuality, no doubt influenced their choices to maintain the status quo. The couple's decisions to maintain a publicly ambiguous relationship, to limit their social life, and to continue their non-disclosure to Jenny were made within a cultural context of virulent homophobia that conflated same-sex intimate sexuality with mental disorder, perversion, criminality, and communism. Privacy, however, had a price.

While other chapters of this dissertation explored desire in terms of sexual

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<sup>126</sup> Rivers, 43.

identity, letter writing, and professionalism in the 1920s, this chapter linked desire to Edith's and Frieda's imaginings and realities. From 1927 to 1943, the correspondence between Edith and Frieda pointed to the unique designs of a long-lasting same-sex intimate partnership. These hopes eventually shaped the realities of Edith's and Frieda's desires. The economy, social status, and the academic world set constraints upon the women's hopes but nevertheless engendered a unique, malleable, and intimate partnership.

The couple's ability to acknowledge both their dreams and their realities allowed them to live in middle class comfort as professional, independent women, to raise a young girl for a few years during the war, to maintain middle-class respectability, and to avoid ostracism by their friends and much of their family. Their partnership required sacrifice and compromise, which Edith termed the "usual penalty for such an unusual affection."<sup>127</sup> The women had postponed living full-time together until the 1940s and buying a house until 1960. Even though Edith and Frieda initially viewed their relationship as a marriage and wanted to adopt children, they did not adopt children. Furthermore the child they raised for a time did not know about their relationship.

Edith and Frieda's professions occupied much of their lives and each woman spent a number of years away from the other in order to gain professional status. Important aspects of their lives were consciously postponed in the hope that future years would be more favourable.<sup>128</sup> Within their small circle of family and friends, Edith and

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<sup>127</sup> Edith to Frieda, 20 July 1926, File 05, Box 036, FFPR.

<sup>128</sup> Author's Note: Frieda's Will and Testament stipulated that the correspondence would be closed to the public until the year 2000. Personal correspondence with Harold Averhill archivist, July 2003, University of Toronto Archives.

Frieda garnered recognition as a same-sex intimate couple. The final years of their correspondence reveals a complicated lesbian partnership bound by gender conventions, middle class mores, professional demands, and economic challenges. The earlier chapters showed how and why the women developed their conception of themselves as devoted women. This last chapter has shown how these women imagined themselves in the future as devoted women and the realities they achieved.

## Conclusion

### Verba Volant Scripta Manent<sup>1</sup>

When I first began this analysis of the Fraser/Williams correspondence, my intention was to bring to light the story of a lesbian couple in early twentieth century Canada. Nevertheless, in the course of writing this dissertation, I discovered that this project had become much more than an exercise in “finding the lesbians.” In this dissertation I have asked, “How did the lesbians find themselves?”

Frieda and Edith found each other as devoted women within their correspondence. In their letters they created a self-defined sexual identity that was in a dialogue with their experiences of circulating cultural discourses of the modern lesbian. They referred to themselves as “devoted women,” their designation of a sexual subjectivity that marked their differentiation from these discourses. As this dissertation has demonstrated, Edith and Frieda, in their correspondence, arrived upon a unique notion of romantic devotion, a sexual identity that was shaped alongside their awareness of contemporary depictions of the “lesbian” in society, science, literature, and theatre. The meanings they attributed to their self-descriptions as “devoted women” emerged out of their self-reflections.

Without the correspondence, the thoughtful, reflective development of Frieda’s and Edith’s passions might not have taken place. Indeed, I believe that the strength of their intimate relationship came from the foundations that were laid in their letters. Notably, the women had been close friends since 1917, but it was only when they initiated writing and saving their letters that the women began to chart the course of their feelings. They began by noticing the other’s absence, then moved on to descriptions of

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<sup>1</sup> Frieda Fraser to Edith Williams, “It is in writing that we are known,” 1 January 1927, File 10, Box 036, FFPR.

how they liked each other, and then talked of love. Without using the word “lesbian,” the women accompanied their declarations of love with suggestions of physical affections, so that after a year of letter-writing, upon their rendezvous, the women culminated their written desire. Their reflections, therefore, were instrumental to the development of their sexual identities as devoted women. Moreover, Edith’s and Frieda’s unique, flexible sexual identities, established in these early years of their correspondence, sustained their relationship throughout their professional and personal lives.

Indeed, what this project brings to the study of the history of sexuality is the internal processes of sexual identity development in relation to cultural discourse. It expands the discussion of how lesbian women responded to modern dissemination of the social/sexual category lesbian in the early twentieth by demonstrating how women were agents in their creation of sexual identity. If descriptions of the modern lesbian did not provide an accurate depiction, then women devised a more accurate, workable representation for themselves.

This dissertation has described how life-writing was employed in the creation and enhancement of desire. Using conversational threads, I traced Edith’s and Frieda’s development and descriptions of their longings, while also noting that the regular appearance and primacy of the letters upheld and maintained the women’s emotional connection. Indeed, the women imbued the body of the beloved letter-writer into the physicality of the letters. Moreover, Edith’s and Frieda’s erotic intimacies and desires were bolstered by their creation of a romantic narrative. Edith and Frieda told each other stories about themselves and other women in same-sex intimate relationships. The telling and re-telling of their and others’ narratives increased their sexual desire and affirmed

their identities as devoted women. Alongside stories of other couples, the women described themselves, in the past, in the present, and in their hopes for the future.

I consider the Fraser/Williams correspondence important not only because of the dialogue between the two women, but also because of its dialogue with modern culture. As my dissertation has demonstrated, the correspondence itself was a material product of modern technologies. Modern developments, including improved writing instruments, easy access to paper, frequent postal delivery, and steam travel, propelled the correspondence's production. Moreover, modern culture in the form of employment for single women offered Edith and Frieda the opportunity and the professional position from which to write.

Modern culture influenced how Edith and Frieda came to view themselves as "devoted women." Indeed, Edith's and Frieda's conscious transformation of their desires into a workable existence was a mark of the "modernity" into which they were born. Their devoted partnership became a malleable relationship that existed within their experience of the modern. It was within this experience of the modern that Frieda and Edith defined themselves in relation to modern disseminations of "women who loved women." Here I have suggested that Edith and Frieda, in their correspondence, defined themselves against what they were not. As voracious readers and avid theatre-goers, Edith and Frieda discussed cultural depictions of women who loved women and yet they did not see themselves represented in science, literature, or theatre. Their correspondence suggested, rather, that they envisioned themselves as entering into a monogamous romantic long-term partnership that held the promise of family. This partnership they named as "devoted."



Moreover, this dissertation contends that Frieda's devoted relationship with Edith aided Frieda's professional success, and conversely, Frieda's professional life contributed to the success of their devoted partnership. During her medical internship and residency, Frieda derived considerable emotional support from Edith in the form of her correspondence. Frieda's palpable loneliness during these years was alleviated by her connection to Edith. Frieda's knowledge that she was loved and listened to by Edith proved invaluable, particularly for a woman in the medical world of the 1920s. Frieda vented her frustrations to Edith, as well as her excitement about her work and concerns over her future. In these frank renditions, this dissertation has highlighted a singular experience of medical education for female physicians that included female physician interaction with peers, attending physicians, and patients. Additionally Frieda's profession contributed to the women's devoted relationship in that the promise of Frieda's medical profession enabled Edith and Frieda to envision a long-term partnership without external financial support.

The potential for long-term financial self-sufficiency offered by Frieda's career in medicine meant that Edith and Frieda were able to consider a long-term relationship that included profession and family. I highlighted this aspect of their letters by contrasting Edith's and Frieda's "imaginings" of the 1920s with their "realities" of the 1930s. Using the themes of establishing a partnership, raising a family, and holding a profession, I explored the material and social conditions that enabled the two women to live their dreams of a lifelong romantic partnership. The breadth of their correspondence has permitted this inquiry into how some of these dreams were fulfilled and some were not.

These hopes included family life in a large home, not unlike the homes of their births, and dreams of twins. Edith sketched designs for a house in which she hoped they would live and the two women imagined themselves raising twins. Edith and Frieda saved items for their future children and the women made some tentative inquiries regarding adoption. Moreover, their hopes of raising children engendered discussions regarding parenting and how to go about living away from their natal home yet still remain connected with family and friends. Frieda hoped that her professional salary would be enough to “keep the wolf at the door.” Edith hoped to get employment that would contribute to life with Frieda.

The realities of Edith’s and Frieda’s lives, as written in the correspondence, portrayed the primacy of preserving their relationship while maintaining their family connection. I contend that Frieda and Edith strategically protected their passions, in terms of disclosure to acquaintances, friends, and family. In the words of Laura Doan, “there were those who did not know, those whom they wanted to know, and those who knew and wished they didn’t.” To acquaintances, Edith and Frieda described themselves as single women. To friends and co-workers, they presented themselves in an ambiguously close relationship. To other devoted female couples Edith and Frieda presented themselves also as devoted. To their mothers and family members, Edith and Frieda strove for family recognition of their devotion. Despite their families’ efforts to derail their relationship, this dissertation has demonstrated how Edith and Frieda managed to safeguard their intimate sexual relationship while also maintaining connection with their families.

For a decade, the two women lived together only on weekends until Edith returned to college and became a veterinarian. Edith and Frieda finally lived together fulltime in 1941, after a correspondence that spanned almost 20 years. Their hopes for children were realized for a time, in the reality of wartime child refugee Jenny Rodd. Thus in some ways, the lifetime dreams of these devoted women were indeed fulfilled. Edith and Frieda succeeded in maintaining a balance between the exigencies of their time and their partnership, a balance that was intractably linked to their unique sexual identities.

In sum, this dissertation is a discussion of same-sex intimate desire in early twentieth century Canada that was self-articulated into a description of sexual subjectivity as “devoted” and influenced by white middle-class status, modern culture and technology, medical professional life, and family. On a grander scale this project can be thought of as an example of how almost every aspect of our lives can be affected by the course of our intimate desires. As evidence, this dissertation has contributed to the historical scholarship in several areas, including that of women in medicine, women and work in Canada and lesbian identity in early twentieth century Canada.

Cameron Duder’s scholarship on lesbians in early twentieth century Canada is confirmed and augmented by this dissertation. Duder’s broad survey looks to the lives of lesbians in Canada. “Writing Desire,” however, has offered a microcosmic examination of the correspondence of one significant sample from Duder’s survey. By looking at this one example more deeply, this dissertation has contributed to the historical scholarship regarding the detailed individual processes of lesbian sexual identity formation. While Duder’s survey examined external signifiers of lesbian identity, this study has considered

the internal and almost daily progression of the women's ruminations about their lives that included thoughts about their desire. Moreover, because this study has concentrated on daily written personal correspondence, this study also contributes to the work of Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Leila Rupp, historians who are interested in the daily lives of private middle-class lesbians. By examining quotidian details of the lives of two such women, this dissertation has answered Kennedy's question, "how did actual women conceptualize themselves and how did that shape the way they moved through their daily lives?" Additionally this study contributes to Elise Chenier's scholarship on lesbian bar culture by offering a portrayal of older middle-class lesbians who were also present in the community but were not visible in Chenier's frame of reference.

Indeed, by looking at details of daily life as expressed in the correspondence, this project confirms and contributes to the scholarship on the history of women in medicine. Historians Regina Morantz-Sanchez and Veronica Strong-Boag offer depictions of the experience of female physicians in the 1920s that echo Frieda's experience as a female physician. Some similar characterizations that were reflected in Frieda's correspondence were her sense of isolation, the fact of her internship in obstetrics, her heavy workload, her lack of a female mentor, her difficulty in finding a residency, and her acknowledgement of the unlikelihood of ever being able to enter into private practice. Additionally, the scholarship suggests that female physicians in heterosexual relationships needed to make considerable concessions in their intimate relationships in order to pursue their medical careers. Often female physicians opted to forgo heterosexual marriage altogether. This study broadens that scholarship by foregrounding Frieda's and Edith's non-heteronormative intimate relationship and the results reveal

benefits and not concessions. Frieda did not have to choose between marriage and medicine. This study shows how Frieda derived emotional support from her devoted relationship in the form of her constant correspondence. Frieda's experiences, good and bad, were shared with someone for whom she cared deeply. Frieda wrote about her triumphs and frustrations; she sent Edith sketches, diagrams, and accounts of her daily experiences with her patients, fellow interns, and attending physicians. Moreover, this study broadens the scholarship by having presented a personal perspective on the daily life of the female intern and resident in the 1920s. As a result this dissertation has contributed to the scholarship by providing an example of a female physician who was supported, acknowledged, and benefitted by her same-sex romantic relationship.

The scholarship on the history of women and work in Canada during the 1920s and 1930s is also supported and broadened by this dissertation. Historians Veronica Strong-Boag, Kathryn McPherson, and Katrina Srigley emphasize the fact of proscriptions against married women holding any gainful employment. Veronica Strong-Boag stresses the federal and provincial policies that discriminated against married women and Srigley and McPherson have reinforced Strong-Boag's contention that these policies affected the lives of almost all Canadian women. For example, in almost all areas of employment, particularly teaching, nursing, and clerical work, a woman lost her job if she married. As an effect of this policy, women who wanted to keep their careers either delayed marriage, hid their marriage for as long as they could, or chose to not marry at all. The scholarship highlights the serious cultural constraints imposed on Canadian women during this period. This dissertation broadens the scholarship by noting that Frieda and Edith, because they were in a devoted partnership, demonstrated that neither

woman had to choose between career and marriage. While this implies a certain kind of freedom for non-heterosexual women in not having to make such a choice, this fact provides some insight into Frieda's and Edith's deliberations over Frieda's medical education and Edith's concerns about her own employment and career prospects. Indeed Frieda supported Edith in her decision to enter into veterinary medicine. And because Edith returned to live with Frieda after her residency in Montreal, it is likely that Frieda supported Edith in other ways as well. While Strong-Boag briefly mentions the professionally supportive lifelong companionships that existed between famous women during these years, this study contributes a distinct portrayal of one mutually supportive lifelong romantic sexual partnership of Canadian women who were not famous.

This dissertation confirms and broadens Srigley's study of single women in Depression Era urban centres. Srigley's contention that young single women continued to find work in Depression era Toronto is upheld by this dissertation. Frieda and Edith wrote with the certainty that they would find work. Srigley also contends that many women were constrained by economic circumstance to remain single in order to earn income for their families. In this context, this study augments Srigley's study by placing women who were romantically devoted to other women into the discussion of Depression Era working women. This study offers an example of two women who were in a devoted partnership, yet presented often themselves as single, who held paying jobs, and who spent weekends together during the Depression. Moreover, as demonstrated in this dissertation, because of the large presence of single working-women in urban areas, Edith and Frieda found little difficulty in maintaining their public façade as single working-women because they were in the company of many. Thus women like Edith and Frieda

were able to move with a particular freedom within the world of single working women—but at some cost. Their letters indicated that if they remained discreet, they had a freedom to work, a freedom to socialize with other working single women, and a freedom to live with the one they loved while also helping each other pursue their careers.

This dissertation, therefore, has demonstrated that from their correspondence, Edith's and Frieda's sense of themselves as devoted women in a partnership deeply pervaded and shaped every important area of their lives, from passion, to profession, to relationships with acquaintances, friends and family, and to their designs for their future.

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When I began writing this dissertation more than a decade ago, I did not know that it would take so long to write, nor could I have ever foreseen the changes in my life that encompassed its writing. While I wrote, my partner and I legally married each other; we have two boys, now five and nine; we have a house and a cat. We maintain regular contact with other lesbian families to ensure that our boys are proud of and know other families like us. Like us, Frieda and Edith were in a long-term relationship, and they did what they could in their own time and their own way. Unlike us, they had little community and even fewer role models, yet within their correspondence, they discovered who they were to each other. Despite the years dividing us and the differences in our concepts regarding our sexualities, I am left feeling nonetheless connected to the feeling of desire that they wrote about in their letters, a desire that was wholly encompassing, bound neither by body nor gender. I realize that I could not have stuck with Edith and

Frieda and their thoughts for so long a time without genuinely liking them. I admire their humour, their tenacity, and their perseverance in writing and saving the correspondence. And I believe that were they to read this dissertation on their legacy of love they would be very pleased.



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