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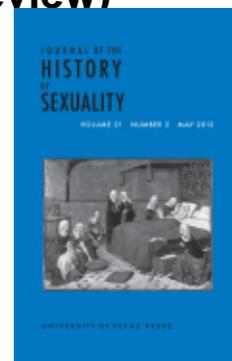
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**Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community,
and: Behind the Mask of Mattachine: The Hal Call Chronicles
and the Early Movement for Homosexual Emancipation (review)**

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exemplified in the Naturfreunde (Friends of Nature) movement that started in 1895 and flourished in the Weimar Republic, becoming a significant mass movement supportive of the Social Democratic and Communist parties.

Especially interesting are chapters 3 to 5, which explore youth hiking from the beginning of the Wandervögel movement in 1900 as an independent youth culture that found in nature an escape from the urban environment defined by adults. In 1913 and 1914 a cultural revolt emerged among the Wandervögel in which a number of radical youth leaders claimed to define the destiny of German youth independently from the dominant nationalistic and militaristic ideology. Williams demonstrates how the revolt was experienced in and publicly associated with a strong homosocial and homoerotic flair (136–45). In the 1920s vibrant hiking clubs fostered a range of political ideologies. In the 1930s the hikers were co-opted to the Nazi regime so that no independent hiking movement survived, although Williams has been able to identify signs of resistance and defiance against the regime. The last part of the book draws a picture of the nature conservation movement, which experienced a trajectory similar to that of the hikers. The early years of the twentieth century were defined by the activities of a few bourgeois idealists that became a mass movement during the Weimar Republic but were subsumed within the Nazi regime.

John Alexander Williams has written a compelling book that answers important questions about the organizational trajectories of German nudists, hikers, and environmentalists. As does any good book, it also leaves some very important questions for future research. We might wonder how organizational life reflected the everyday experiences of nudism, hiking, and environmentalism. We might also ask about the historical continuities and ruptures in the German turn to nature and the body.

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REVIEW ESSAY: READING, WRITING, AND REVOLUTION

Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community. By MARTIN MEEKER. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Pp. 320. \$80.00 (cloth); \$27.50 (paper).

Behind the Mask of Mattachine: The Hal Call Chronicles and the Early Movement for Homosexual Emancipation. By JAMES T. SEARS. New York: Haworth, 2006. Pp. 540. \$57.95 (cloth); \$42.95 (paper).

In the fall of 1952, openly gay journalist Hal Call migrated to California, a journey that he would facilitate for many other men in the next decades. Although Call was, by all accounts, a difficult and contradictory person (and,

in the opinion of some, mean and ruthless), he campaigned relentlessly for the openness and sexual freedom that would allow other men and women to come out in the 1960s. Seeking out Harry Hay's Mattachine Society when he arrived on the West Coast, Call instantly disliked its secrecy and left-wing leadership. As James Sears argues in *Behind the Mask of Mattachine: The Hal Call Chronicles and the Early Movement for Homosexual Emancipation*, Call saw his service in World War II as a personal commitment to American democracy that was consistent with gay civil rights but not Communism. He viewed Hay, Jim Kepner, and other founders as "unpatriotic" and "naïve," and in 1953 he deposed them in an internal coup (183). However, as Martin Meeker argues in *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community*, Call and his contemporaries were more than skilled organizers: homophiles created a communications revolution that made queer communities coherent and visible and gave them a voice they were denied in mainstream publications until the 1970s.

Together, Sears and Meeker contribute to the long history of radical queer politics.¹ Scholars interested in media and mass culture outside GLBTQ studies should also be interested in Meeker's route to understanding how reading, writing, and publishing created "sexual communication networks" that have "gone through a radical transformation throughout the course of the twentieth century." These transformations, Meeker contends, have had an effect on everything we mean when we say the words gay community: in other words, "identity formation, community building, geography making, and social movement organizing" (9–10). For his part, Sears supplies the reader with lively interviews and documents that evoke rich debates within the homophile movement and is liberal with the occasional quirky fact that you rarely get from scholars. (Who knew that pornography photographers escaped obscenity prosecutions in the 1960s by holding erect penises down with tape?)

As Meeker's earlier work has argued, the radicalism of the homophiles has been obscured by the more confrontational politics they enabled, and queer people challenged social convention and the law long before Stonewall.²

¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (Emeryville, CA: Seal, 2007); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Emeryville, CA: Seal, 2008); and Stryker's film documentary, *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005).

² Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Stein, "Boutillier and the U.S. Supreme Court's Sexual Revolution," *Law and History Review* 23, no. 3 (2005): 491–536; and David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.)

Mattachine, Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), ONE Institute, and the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) adapted swiftly to the changing needs of the people who turned to them for help and prided themselves on delivering practical aid: jobs, housing, and medical care. As part of this agenda, they seized opportunities both to create and to make a case for gay citizenship. Queers who lacked civil rights armed themselves with information instead.

We have had little empirical understanding of how urban centers of GLBT activism knitted together a national community in webs of information. A key premise of *Contacts Desired* is that queers did not acquire identity upon meeting others “like them” in cities.³ Rather, they knew what they were, what they desired, and often what to call themselves. But they did not necessarily know how to make contact with others who shared their desires. It was publishing that gave them the knowledge they needed to plan their lives; subsequently, community organizers and institutions associated with these publications helped them activate their plans.

Homophile publishing was also part of a national civil rights story. When *ONE Magazine* was labeled obscene by the United States Postal Service in 1954, ONE Institute sued successfully as a codefendant in the landmark *Roth v. United States* (1958) and won the right to mailing privileges. Wider distribution rights for its newsletters in turn made homophiles visible as “experts” who then guided journalists through their communities and provided lists of other experts who could speak to the issues journalists were curious about. The *Ladder* and the *Mattachine Review*, circulated informally to far more people than were listed as subscribers, also forced these small groups of unpaid organizers to reinvent themselves as politicized social service organizations.

A disproportionate number of the early homophiles were journalists, and bookstores were critical organizing spaces and anchors for community, particularly for lesbians. The founders of DOB, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, were working journalists prior to creating the *Ladder*. Hal Call merely shifted his competitive drive from mainstream publishing to sexual rights activism. Call not only helped to edit the *Mattachine Review* but also cofounded the Pan Graphic Press, which published it as well as the *Ladder*, travel guides, and other erotica. By the 1960s Call was also a leading producer of pornographic films and owner of both the Adonis Bookstore and the Circle J film rental store in San Francisco. *Behind the Mask of Mattachine* provides voluminous documentation of Call’s multiple roles in gay politics, and both books suggest new national interpretations for a field that still relies heavily on community studies. For example, Meeker questions whether San Francisco’s position as a gay capital was entirely predetermined because of its history of sexual tourism and illegal enterprise, as Nan Alamilla Boyd has argued. Instead, he points out that “changing networks of communication . . . placed San Francisco near the center of

³ Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” in *The Long, Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 29–56.

a new—new at least to a wider circle of people—sexual geography of the United States” (16). Similarly, Sears implicitly questions whether World War II was a vehicle for radicalizing and unifying gay men: Call’s war experience solidified his liberal anti-Communism, and he avoided other gay men during his service for fear of being disgraced.

Meeker also illuminates the question of why gay men’s politics and lesbian activism fragmented in the 1970s. In contrast to Mattachine’s high focus on protecting men from public entrapment, the Daughters of Bilitis created “a moderate path to visibility” that was “guided both by principles of publicity and privacy” and by the belief that “organized lesbians” would be perceived as sinister and threatening by a mass audience (58–81). Furthermore, although both men and women were routinely persecuted by bar sweeps and institutional investigations, sexism made lesbians vulnerable *as women*.⁴ Rather than creating new networks, as Mattachine and ONE had done, DOB built a mailing list for the *Ladder* by tapping into existing networks. This familiar tactic, Meeker argues, was turned to a bolder purpose: “Individual lesbians were helping to break the hold that face-to-face relations, insular friendship cliques, and novels removed from personal connection had on the discussion of homosexuality and the exchange of information among lesbians” (89).

Contacts made through the homophile press during the 1950s were superseded by new national visibility in the mainstream media during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Blockbuster nonfiction aimed at a mass audience like Jess Stearn’s *The Grapevine* (1964) ripped the cover off the “secret world” of lesbians—with more than a little help from the new experts in the homophile community.⁵ Stearn’s attention to four major metropolitan areas and several suburban ones argued more forcefully than even post-Stonewall liberationists could that “we” were “everywhere.” As Meeker argues, “from this point forward, homosexuality was spatialized and, further, often localized according to a more complex national geography” (133). Similarly, guides for gay men provided a map for *Life* magazine’s June 1964 article “Homosexuality in America.” This glossy feature included photos of leather bars like San Francisco’s Toolbox (causing it to be overrun with leather daddy wannabes and deserted by its former patrons). The issue sold out two days after it hit the newsstands in major cities, was reprinted, and ultimately sold 7.3 million copies (Meeker, 152–55, 194).

Importantly, Meeker argues that the *Life* article, by depicting San Francisco as the gay capital, actually *transformed* it into the gay capital and may have destroyed Mattachine in the process. The organization was flooded

⁴ Stacy Braukman, “‘Nothing Else Matters but Sex’: Cold War Narratives of Deviance and the Search for Lesbian Teachers in Florida, 1959–1963,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 553–75.

⁵ Jess Stearn, *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian* (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

to the breaking point with correspondence from men who wished to move there. Cracks in the organization also developed as gay men embraced public sexuality, a development consistent with Call's belief that male desire was critical to the vitality and vision of the movement. Ken Burns and other activists disagreed and "did not wish to bring this sexual element directly into the Society or the *Review*" (Sears, 416–17). Through documenting Call's careers as an activist, theorist, publisher, and pornographer, Sears, like Meeker, reveals important connections between male homophiles and later radical movements, such as the Gay Liberation Front and ACT-UP, which would openly claim a politics of desire.

Unfortunately, there are serious structural flaws in *Behind the Mask of Mattachine* that sometimes leave the potential of these insights unrealized. Sears's presentation of evidence is at times woefully unedited, suggestive, and overly reliant on the reader's critical faculties, and it is easy to lose track of the book's core themes. Chapter titles don't seem to attach readily to the text they introduce, and the chapters themselves are not chronological. The bulk of the book focuses on the 1950s, but some chapters take us to the present, then drop back in time to Call's early career, only to then leap forward to the recent past. Perhaps the most confusing technique Sears employs is to create "arguments" or debates about gay men's politics by creating fictional conversations (in which he quotes from actual documents) between activists of different generations. It is creative but confusing, especially without any methodological discussion or even notification of what he is trying to do. Seizing statements out of time and out of context, the invented exchanges are not clear about whether there are empirical connections between one set of ideas and another or even which of these people actually knew each other.

Buried in this book is a biography of Call that not only properly establishes his role in the creation of modern GLBT community but also makes a critical intervention in how historians understand the importance of cultural production, and eroticism, to the homophile movement. Sears also notes the role that science fiction and other forms of mass-market genre fiction played in connecting gay men, a generative insight that someone needs to follow up. Publications like *Weird Tales* had sections where enthusiasts advertised for pen pals, and it was here that many gay men inserted coded language in which they sought each other out. Cold War era critics articulated such magazines as dangerous to youth. Did they also know that, as Sears suggests, gay men were queering "spaces within ostensible heterosexual correspondence clubs and science fiction chapters, entered public spaces" (109)?

Together, Meeker and Sears chart the trajectory of a movement history that laid the groundwork for decriminalizing and destigmatizing homosexuality by taking control of and spreading information. Homophiles and their publications became a source of legal advice, spread core concepts about rights-based organizing, publicized political principles, and made

conflicts within the movement available for national debate. They created intellectual networks, informed queers of other reading they might do to understand their condition better, and told them where they might obtain it. Modern magazines like the *Advocate*, *Poz*, *Out*, and *Curve* (as well as the countless free publications that map queer activities, restaurants, and bars in major cities and vacation destinations) all owe a cultural and political debt to homophile activists. By their very existence, and through their eventual success in fighting the censorship of literary materials about homosexuality, gay and lesbian publications became a critical platform for the national and local publishing that characterizes the contemporary queer world.

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