The official historical memory of 1950s America is well-known and revered as a time of middle-class affluence. Americans set for themselves the idyllic but inflexible life goal of the suburban nuclear household, with booming families and neighborhoods with a car parked in every driveway. The world was filled with bobby socks, ice cream socials, and a Renaissance of American optimism and pure, traditional post-war values. Yet behind this veneer of wholesomeness took place events that didn’t necessarily fit into the American dream. In 1950, the Mattachine Society was founded (the first gay and lesbian organization in the U.S.), and in 1948 and 1953 Alfred Kinsey published the Kinsey Report composed of two books which not only explicitly and openly dealt with sexuality but recognized that there were, in fact, a good number of people in the United States that weren’t heterosexual. This blew the doors wide open on a subject which, up to that point, had yet to be readily acknowledged by the public. The mid-20th century also saw a boom in popularity of pulp fiction novels, which were often cheap, easily discardable thrills whose contents reflected anything but family values. The combination of these events created a melting pot that was perfect for the creation of a new form of literary sexual revolution.

Many of these paperback books grew popular as a result of the counterculture that rose against McCarthy-era America. These ‘exploitational novels’ dealt with material often shunned by society, ranging anywhere from sex and drug use to, of course, homosexuality. People would

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scan lines of sensational thrillers to be confronted by shocking depictions of scantily clad women, posing unabashedly and provocatively. For the closeted people of the day, it was one of the few sparse affirmations of a lifestyle more commonly seen as a sickness. By reading between the lines of moral warnings, gratuitous homophobia, and often horrible endings, readers can gain insight into a world beneath the veneer of superficial perfection in which we paint the mid-20th century. While navigating the pitfalls of a heavily censored society and male-based readership, lesbian pulp fiction helped establish queer literature and presence during the pre-gay rights era.

Paperback pulp production had been around long before the 1950s and the breakthrough of lesbian fiction; as such, exploitational novels were nothing new. The creation of inexpensive genres began as early as 1896 with the publication of *The Argosy*, a sensational magazine targeted towards middle and lower classes. Though pulp paperbacks broke the merchandising mold of the flagging book industry through larger print runs, the real setback came when bookstores of the 1900s were too scarce to hold the numerous books being published every year, and mail order limited the much-needed spontaneity of book-buying without people’s ability to browse. The solution came in the form of mass-produced pulp companies, beginning with the creation of Penguin Books in 1935 by Allen Lane and later cemented in 1939 by Robert de Graff’s Pocket Books. Their success, in contrast to earlier attempts, hinged on moving the shelves from their stores to highly frequented areas such as drugstores, newsstands, and train stations. People were eager for something to peruse as they waited in line, and with embellished titles and florid covers, pulp novels were ideal for this purpose. Low cost and quick production made them easy to discard, and sales flourished from the reintegration of impulsive purchases at low prices. Much of the liberty pulp authors had in subject material was only possible because of

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paperbacks being modeled around impulse buys and larger stocks; their reputation of quantity before quality did nothing to dim the sales, and in fact allowed for authors to begin dealing more seriously with subjects that were traditionally ‘off the table’.

The initial popularity was negligible in comparison to the major uplift in sales during and immediately after World War II. Armed Service Editions of popular fiction were shipped out to sixteen million men and women in the armed forces in the form of uniform-pocket sized books that were easily discarded. By the end of the war, over 123 million books had been sold at six cents per copy to soldiers requiring something small, cheap, and engaging. When the war was over, many people carried their preference for the convenient format back home. The American public had cemented a taste for these “modern” editions, and over ninety-five million paperbacks were sold in 1947.5

It was during this post-war era that lesbian pulp fiction came fully into the pulp spotlight. They landed directly in the sweet spot between traditional romance novels and the counterculture’s interest in the taboo, making them extremely popular. Several titles with lesbian content had been published before the 1950s which had garnered a small audience, such as Torchlight to Valhalla by Gale Wilhelm in 1938 (with a rare happy outcome for both protagonists).6 In 1950, however, lesbian pulp fiction firmly took root with a book that would define the next few decades of lesbian pulp fiction’s popularity, titled Women’s Barracks by Tereska Torres. Women’s Barracks was less a lesbian pulp novel and more a pulp novel that happened to contain lesbians, as it focused on a group of women and their experiences during the war in close quarters based on Torres’s personal anecdotes. Many subsequent authors in the

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5 Menand.
6 Forrest, xv.
genre cited Torres’s debut novel as their inspiration. More than that, however, it served as incentive for authors and publishers alike to enter the genre when it sold over three million copies. The attention it garnered led Gold Medal Books to later print Marijane Meaker’s Spring Fire in 1953, the first book of the time to contain two lesbian leads.

As the popularity of the genre grew, so did the amount of scrutiny it underwent. Authors and publishers alike had to work within the confines of censorship to create something acceptable enough to be published and distributed without falling prey to obscenity charges, and many had become increasingly agitated over how the youth of the country were being affected by such ‘moral corruption.’ It wasn’t long before the outcry against such illicit material being distributed culminated in a series of hearings and inquiries by the U.S. House of Representatives in May of 1952. During the examination, the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials selected Torres’s Women’s Barracks as an exhibit of obscenity (which was by then a bestseller, and sold one million copies more in the resulting publicity).

Although the paperback publishers survived the investigation relatively unscathed compared to other industries, there was still a “climate of fear in the publishing industry,” as Susan Striker notes. As a result, lesbian writers were increasingly challenged to balance their desire for an accurate and empathetic portrayal of their characters with the stipulation that it was required, in the end, to be a cautionary tale all along. This usually resulted in one of the characters dying horribly or going insane. Meanwhile, the remaining partner would sometimes be lucky enough to get a ‘happy’ ending, repenting their deviation from the norm and falling into

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7 Bryan.
8 Forrest, xv.
9 Menand.
heterosexual bliss. The tragedy was emphasized as a moral warning to the reader in an attempt to appease potential fines and dissuade possible sexual explorations of the readers, but the troubling fate of many protagonists did not prevent queer readership from retaining a positive influence from these stories. The depictions of a larger culture reflecting internal experiences reached out to both closeted and open individuals, providing a sense of connection that many had lacked. Some authors received many letters from their readers celebrating just that, as Ann Bannon states: “[They] wrote from ... all over the country. Such was their isolation that many of them were grateful to me for reassuring them that they were not totally alone in the world.”

Then the 60s arrived, ushering in a new era for lesbian pulp fiction. As the gay rights movement started shutting down the closeted nature of the industry and demanding better representations, *Roth vs. United States* opened new avenues with its stricter definition for pornography and the publication thereof. Although this lessened the amount of scrutiny that pulps dealt with, it hadn’t posed much of a problem for some of the publications. Explicit pornographic content may have been toned down in response to the House of Representative’s examination of contents, the covers of pulp had remained as lurid as ever. The *Roth* decision aided the industry most instead through its allowance for authors to cater less towards the censored advisory ending and gain more creative license.

To a closeted lesbian of the time, any representation was an infinite improvement. Women faced potential humiliation and worse to obtain a copy of these books. Katherine Forrest states in her anthology *Lesbian Pulp Fiction* that an “overwhelming need led me to walk a gauntlet of fear up to the cash register … I stumbled out of the store in possession of … a book

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13 Bryan.
14 Blanchard, p. 478.
as necessary to me as air.”\textsuperscript{15} They had more to fear than getting strange looks from the cashier. Although the books were tailored to acceptable standards of censorship, to be caught with one was beyond taboo.

However, authorship of the niche had by this point become clustered with more than just lesbian authors - many men came in under female pseudonyms, either out of a prurient interest, a desire to cash in on the money, or (more rarely) a genuine investment in the story. This counterpart lesbian pulp written by men, for men instead of by women, for women was given the apt name of ‘sleaze’ - for it rarely focused more on the experiences of the women than the titillation of their encounters - while also providing a ‘safety net’ throughout lesbian pulp’s timeline in a world that was undeniably tilted towards men’s interests.

The exact amount of lesbian pulp fiction written to cater to either audience is unknown. According to Bryan, most of the lesbian pulp books were:

\“...pornographic in nature, directed towards the male reader, with little to no character development and excessively lurid sexuality. Lesbian women were never the primary market. In fact, most of the books ... were written by men who had nothing to do with gay women and had probably never met one knowingly.”\textsuperscript{16}

Bannon, alternatively, has stated that although many works written as “lesbian fiction” were by men under female pseudonyms, most were made for women by lesbian writers, a statement confirmed by Zimet.\textsuperscript{17} The truth was, in all likelihood, somewhere in the middle, with many honest portrayals obscured with overt lasciviousness in an act of self-preservation.

The absence of a prominent gay pulp fiction counterpart to the lesbian writers indicates just how much pandering to heterosexual males provided a relatively safe haven for lesbian fiction. Although there was a sizable amount of gay pulp fiction targeted towards men with

\textsuperscript{15} Forrest, ix.
\textsuperscript{16} Bryan.
\textsuperscript{17} Zimet, p.12, 21.
notable titles such as *The Man From C.A.M.P.* (a play on *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*) and *Mr. Queen*, they weren’t granted the honor of being displayed on storefront racks in the usual pulp fashion. Without the cultural acceptance of heterosexual women enjoying gay pulp for fun, the books were restricted from public eyes in the back of a store’s pornography section. Indeed, the male readership ensured lesbian pulp fiction’s continued survival with the agency provided by their privilege and libido - gay male pulp was not so lucky.

Over time, a discreet but notable split developed in the lesbian pulp genre between the production of male-oriented novels and those written by lesbian authors. The former were most often the more gaudy, lewd, and remarkably homophobic pieces of pulp fiction, blatantly reinforcing stereotypes and the knowledge that the protagonist’s behavior was depraved and in need of a little male guidance. Books of the latter were instead slyly supportive throughout, often using the freedom their disreputable medium granted to portray more radical views on the subject. These were written with representation in mind in a time when such content could only be published in books made for the gutter.

Nowhere is this more clearly reflected than on the covers. Most commonly, women wore regularly ripped bodices and unrealistic undergarments - standard fare for pulp covers - as they meaningfully eyed each other or the onlooker. If a confused and harassed-looking man stood to one side, you were almost guaranteed to have struck gold. The portrayal of the protagonists was rarely positive; covers were often stripped of whatever characterization - and clothing - was present in the actual work to satisfy the male audience, as the material had to be suitably disapproving of its subject to avoid unwanted attention by the government. No matter how genuinely heartfelt the work itself may have been, the outside presentation was always required to cater to a male readership. Ann Bannon states in regards to the covers of the books that:

18 Scot.
“...I often felt rather sorry for the young woman looking up at the reader. She was clearly intended to appeal to the large male readership, and not the lesbian constituency that we … thought we were reaching out to. [I think] they made the assumption so often made in respect to children’s textbooks: if we can make it interesting for the boys, we don’t need to worry about the girls. The boys will accept them, and the girls won’t have a choice. The girls always go along anyway.”

Bannon goes on to explain how, when it came to choosing the cover, the authors were disregarded because of their focus on how well the characters were portrayed as opposed to how well the covers would sell. Her experience when seeing the cover of Beebo Brinker for the first time was like ‘entering the Twilight Zone,’ with the main character repainted to be young, nubile, and almost unrecognizable, with the one bonus of being a rare cover which didn’t focus on female-on-female sex scenes.

Yet all good things must come to an end. Even as America’s public slowly became more receptive to the idea of non-heterosexual relations in discussion and the concept of rights began to dawn on the horizon, lesbian pulp fiction was gradually going out of style. The beginning of the sexual revolution in the 1960s - ironically brought about in part by lesbian pulp’s presence during the 1950s - marked the end of its golden age. The pulp fiction industry had proved to be incredibly unsustainable as its business model of high quantity, low quality books at an cheap price left millions of books unsold, and it was soon replaced by more reputable paperback reproductions. By the 80s, the feminist movement’s discourse over the self-flagellating nature of the portrayal of females in lesbian pulp fiction led to its cementation in the eyes of the public as an embarrassing piece of history best swept under the rug.

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19 Zimet, 9.
20 Ibid., 11.
21 Menand.
a time when its representation could be considered unacceptable by society. It showed a
discussion of sexuality and pride in gay culture when both were supposedly nonexistent. The
most surefire way to determine lesbian pulp fiction was successful was when its subject group
had enough voice to speak out against it. In spite of lesbian pulp falling from grace in its later
due to its outdated and near-offensive representation of queer relationships, it played a key role
in allowing that time to come to pass.

The resilience of lesbian pulp fiction writers of the 1950s would prove to have paid off,
heavily impacting the lives and mindsets of many. When one considers the numerous challenges
born from the restrictively heteronormative social climate such as censorship of positive
portrayals and a libido-centered male readership, the fact that these authors were able to retain
any of their original intended message becomes all the more impressive. Even when the endings
were made tragic and the girls turned straight, there were themes throughout many of the better
books such as rejection of the patriarchy, a refusal of traditional gender roles, and - of course - an
examination of what it meant to be part of a culture that was dangerous to be seen in and often
very, very isolated outside of select areas.

Lesbian pulp fiction was a genre full of self-contradictions, forced to condemn and
hypersexualize the very subject matter it wished to express truthfully and candidly. Though seen
as the antithesis of respectability in the eyes of the public, lesbian authors were able to make
their works public through a discardable, discreet, and cheap medium, one overlooked enough to
become massively successful - and available (though hard won) to many grateful readers
desperate for something that described a story like their own. It provided a personal connection
to countless closeted members of society, often blatantly subverting aspects of the perfect veneer
of the 1950s lifestyle, and on a larger scale helped the underground community move into a more
vocal, visible sphere to start demanding both positive representation and rights. In a world where it was a crime to be queer, the impact of lesbian pulp fiction was nothing less than revolutionary.


