The Lesbian Premodern. Edited by Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watt. The New Middle Ages. Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Pp. 256. ISBN: 9780230616769.

The Lesbian Premodern offers an innovative solution to the perennial marginalization of the "long view" in sexuality studies. The editors invited leading historians and theorists of the "lesbian" to participate in what they term a "conversation in print" (1), ensuring contemporary theorists' direct engagement with theoretically inflected historical projects by the simple yet elegant solution of requiring it. The collection's strength is the acknowledgment that conversation at its best involves diverse points of view, dynamically vocalized constructive critique, and even the occasional naysayer. Karma Lochrie's preface and Robyn Wiegman's postscript strongly urge caution with the project as a whole, concerned that the title works to reify the term "lesbian" or that the editors' proposal that history "*is* theory" ultimately overemphasizes theory and thereby masks the contribution historiographical methods for mining the archives and artifacts of the past might make. The editors are to be commended not only for producing a volume in which each individual piece provides strong resources for theorizing the lesbian premodern, but also for their stalwart support of a place for everyone at the conversational table, even those people who vigorously question the possibilities and parameters of such a conversation at all.

The editors conceived part 1, "Theories and Historiographies," as a forum in which to review and therefore preserve productive recent additions to theorizing lesbian history. Valerie Traub, Carla Freccero, and Theodora A. Jankowski revisit theories they have published elsewhere that address the tension between modern political questions of identity and the near impossibility of finding any premodern person who fits contemporary patterns ascribed to lesbians. Traub articulates several dozen questions that result from considering lesbian history as "cycles of salience—that is . . . forms of intelligibility whose meanings recur, intermittently and with a difference, across time," retrieving the "symptomatic preoccupations about the meanings of women's bodies and behaviors" (23) to provide new avenues for lesbian historiography. Freccero advocates queer history as a history of haunting that attends to the allusive rather than the concrete, concerning itself with fleeting images and emotions that are the spectral traces of the marginalized, including the lesbian. Jankowski emphasizes the binary of virgin/non-virgin to problematize simplistic ascriptions of patriarchal privileging of male over female, a contribution that retrieves for lesbian history the political interventions of influential virgin women through demarcating the "lesbian" as a political rather than sexual entity.

In my view, the essays of Anne Laskaya and Lara Farina as a pair provide a substantive new intervention, asking scholars of the premodern to reconsider reception history around the figure of the lesbian. Laskaya attends to the possibility of an audience that includes women in the throes of same-sex desire, suggesting that popular tales of heterosexual transgression such as May/December romances sparked recognition and reinterpretation among audience members involved in other types of transgressive romance. Farina argues against scholarly categorization of certain texts as definitively nonerotic, suggesting that a lesbian erotic of intersecting surfaces and pleasures can be found in, or created by, a wider variety of texts than an erotic that privileges penetration. Together, these essays reframe the apparent failure of lesbian historiography to identify specific instances of same-sex sexual practices in the premodern world as a nonproblem: in a postmodern theoretical world, authorial intent is rarely as relevant as the interpretative possibilities of reception.

Part 2, "Readings and Histories," consists of five case studies, some inflected by the new historiographies proposed in part 1, some not. Lisa M. C. Weston follows Laskaya's and Farina's rethinking of reception history by examining a letter written by one early medieval nun to another that has been preserved in a compilation with Jerome's letter to Marcella and a *vita* of Radegund. Reading all three texts in conjunction, she tracks the intricacies of "becoming a virgin in community" (95) in order to determine how gender and sexuality are both reoriented in the process of becoming a nun. Anna Kłosowska illustrates a lesbian history of ascetic texts, positing that the idealized *femme* figures in manuscript illuminations of hagiographies and Bibles that were destined for female readers were not only models of female readers but also deployed the tempting female body in the view (literally) of readers of both genders. In the only non-European project, Ruth Vanita reviews medieval Indian medical understandings of sexual reproduction in her analysis of a tale concerning same-sex reproduction between two goddesses, all the more provocative since one version of the tale emphasizes the goddesses' desire for each other over their desire for a child. Her approach seeks a place in the lesbian premodern for the desire for impregnation, rather than assuming it as a side effect of imposed heteronormativity. Judith Bennett questions the consistent trend to heterosexualize a premodern artifact, a fifteenth-century English memorial brass that etches the bodies of an older Agnes and a younger Elizabeth in conjunction rather than the typical husband and wife pairing. This "lesbian-like" relationship, to use Bennett's influential term, is perhaps the closest any essay in the compilation comes to finding "actual" lesbians, marking once again the appeal of specificity.

In the final essay of this section, Helmut Puff names and begins to fill a startling gap in lesbian history: the sixteenth-century resurgence of interest in Sappho, both her poetry and her role in mapping same-sex desire, has never been traced.

Part 3, "Encounters with the Lesbian Premodern," is in a certain sense the heart of the project (though perhaps less so for the readers of *Medieval Feminist Forum*, who will find the historical work more immediately relevant). The approaches in the five essays and the postscript to the idea of a conversation in print reveal a range of interpretations as to what the project was intended to achieve. For example, Lillian Fadermann does not rethink her own projects in light of the sustained contribution of parts 1 and 2, but rather insists against the grain of almost all the essays in the book on the retrieval of specific instances of same-sex desire. She thereby names the conundrum of the lesbian premodern: however innovative a method devised to counteract the near impossibility of locating historical lesbians might be, if all that emerges is spectral lesbian readers, the project participates on some level in the erasure of that which it seeks to retrieve even while mapping new and fascinating terrains. Other contributors find the collection more useful. Heike Bauer draws directly on Traub's "cyles of salience" to think through a concept of "lesbian time" in order to contest periodization within lesbian history itself; Linda Garber reflects on the variety of ways in which the collection proves the editors' proposal that premodern research *is* theory; and Martha Vicinus reconsiders the nineteenth-century author that is the focus of her research by tracking her subject's "affective relationship with the past" (195) as a combination of haunting and affective touching. Most compellingly, Elizabeth Freeman views the collection as laying down the gauntlet for modern theorists to reconsider their assumption that sexual orientation is a secular topic, suggesting that the sacramentality of the religious climate that framed most of the premodern essays gives a body and a texture to theorizing the lesbian which is lacking in a purely secular approach.

Jessica A. Boon
UNC-Chapel Hill