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Fashioning Fetishism from the Pages of *London Life*

Lisa Z. Sigel

Though largely forgotten by historians, a magazine called *London Life* flourished in interwar Britain.[1] This magazine became a site for queer and kinky pleasures, as its readers attested in surprisingly frank ways. In 1930, for example, one reader calling herself "Betty" wrote to that magazine's popular correspondence column about the diversity of thrills that could be found in its pages: "This interesting business of thrills—what queer ways people get them. Some by wearing super tight corsets, some by tying themselves up in all sorts of positions of discomfort, some by covering their legs in silk."[2] A columnist wrote about the prevalence of kinks. According to her, "If kinks were a definite sign of insanity, then a surprising number of people would have to be classed as insane. For almost everyone has a kink of some kind, although few will readily

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[1] Despite the wealth of ideas in its pages, few scholars have examined *London Life* in any depth. Edward Shorter mentions *London Life* in passing; see *Written in the Flesh: A History of Desire* (Toronto, 2005), 223. David Kunzle, an art historian, used the magazine to discuss fetishism during the 1920s and 1930s and provides the most detailed discussion of the magazine; see *Fashion and Fetishism: Corsets, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture* (Gloucestershire, 2004). Valerie Steele, a fashion historian, mentions *London Life* in the context of the corset, while Robert Bienvenu, a sociologist, examines it to consider the emergence of sadomasochism as a symbolic system; see Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT, 2001); Robert Bienvenu, "The Development of Sado-masochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1998). Peter Farrer has republished the correspondence from *Bits of Fun*, *London Life*, and other sources concerned with cross-dressing and sexual discipline in a series of volumes; Peter Farrer, ed., *Confidential Correspondence on Cross-Dressing, 1911–1915* (Liverpool, 1997), *Confidential Correspondence on Cross-Dressing*, pt. 2, *1916–1920* (Liverpool, 1998); *Cross Dressing between the Wars: Selections from London Life, 1923–1933* (Liverpool, 2000); and *Cross Dressing between the Wars: Selections from London Life, 1934–1941* (Liverpool, 2006).

[2] Betty, "The Thrills of Freedom," *London Life*, 1 November 1930, 20.

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admit or talk about it."[3] Even the front cover of the 15 September 1934 issue promised "Some Queer Stories and Some Queerer Letters." Queer and kinky pleasures abounded, and *London Life* became the place where people could openly discuss them. Much of the material in the magazine came from its readers. Between 1923, when *London Life* established a regular correspondence column and October 1941, when it ended, people wrote many thousands of letters about corsets, stockings, lingerie, amputees, girl boxing, rubber, wetting, high heels, long hair, tattooing, piercing, cross-dressing, rings, and human ponies. In exquisite detail, they fashioned whom they wanted to be and whom or what they loved. Popular culture made room for people to write their own narratives of desire.

Though readers might well have fictionalized their persons, in their letters about girl boxing, corsets for women, and amputee fetishism, they illustrated the ways that gender and sexual anxieties ramified through interwar Britain during a moment of rapid change. An analysis of their letters allows historians to consider how the interwar context affected their sexualities. Rather than merely responding to this context, however, letter writers created it by looking backward in the construction of an erotic nostalgia and forward to the erotics of modern life. In situating the self along an axis from an imagined past into an imaginary future, these individuals constructed the present on which they scripted their sexual identities.

CONTEXT FOR NEW DESIRES

The interwar years opened room for new erotics. The Great War had shaped bodies, gender roles, social relations, and methods of expression, and people struggled with its legacy for decades. Though historians have long debated the impact of the war in terms of continuities or radical disjunctions, most agree that it affected the whole of society. Some 5 million British men—roughly 22 percent of the male population—participated in military service.[4] Virtually every person in Britain saw someone, whether a relative, friend, colleague, lover, spouse, or companion, wrenched out of daily life, only some of whom would eventually return.[5]

The effects of the war lingered after the armistice in 1918. Though not every soldier experienced the horrors of trench warfare and its repercussions, the postwar world remained littered with traumatized and disabled people suffering from shell shock, wounds, and amputation creating its own sort of distress.[6] Those who could not forget the anxieties and nightmares of the war were often locked in mental asylums.[7] And those who could work through such experiences flooded the cinemas, the publishing houses, and the art houses with their efforts. Thus, the war

[3] "Memoirs of a Lady Tattooist," *London Life*, 3 January 1931, 23.

[4] Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago, 1996), 15.

[5] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), 2.

[6] Seth Koven, "Remembering and Dismemberment: Crippled Children, Wounded Soldiers, and the Great War in Great Britain," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1167–1202.

[7] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 2.

as an experience, as a memory, and as a fragment of cultural expression marked the interwar years.

Literary critics, art historians, and historians have debated the impact of the Great War on self-expression for generations. For much of the time, this debate has taken the route of considering the war's relationship to modernity and modernism.[8] Paul Fussell's examination of the impact of the war found that the experience of war engendered a deep sense of irony and despair.[9] Modris Eksteins's work follows from Fussell's by seeing the war as central to the birth of modern consciousness.[10] People no longer saw their world as strictly rational or logical; the methods they used to decipher themselves and their environment came to rest on longings and will as much as reason and measure.[11] Dynamism and illegibility came to replace slow and careful reasoning as the model for the modern age. New templates for writing and representation emerged. Modernists like James Joyce captured stream of consciousness through experimentation in form and structure. Among less skilled and polished writers, attempts to speak a truth about sexual subjectivity took a variety of forms. In some cases, sex and aggression exploded onto the page in a hash of words. In others, the form of carefully wrought fantasy allowed individuals to organize their accounts.

Historians have suggested that the war profoundly affected gender roles and gender relations. The idealization of sacrifice and heroism encouraged men to volunteer for service, but did not prepare them to withstand the horrors of trench warfare. As a result, men's wills gave way to nerves. As Martin Francis states, the late Victorian model of a masculine flight from domesticity "became impaled upon the barbed wire of the Somme."[12] Other men revalued femininity, especially mothering, throughout the period and welcomed a return to domesticity at the end of the war.[13]

The war became the backdrop for well-orchestrated antagonisms between the sexes.[14] Many commentators blamed women for the inability to return to prewar

[8] Winter (ibid., 2–5) provides a summary of the discussion of the impact of the war on traditional versus modern motifs in art history.

[9] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975).

[10] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York, 1989).

[11] Ibid., 290–91.

[12] Martin Francis, "The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity," *Historical Journal* 45, no. 3 (September 2002): 637–52, quote at 641.

[13] See, e.g., John M. Mackenzie, "The Imperial Pioneer and Hunter and the Masculine Stereotypes in Late Victorian and Edwardian Times," in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940*, ed. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester, 1987), 179–98; Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994); Michael Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 2005): 342–62; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 168–69; Angus McLaren, *The Trial of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago, 1997), 233–34.

[14] Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France* (Princeton, NJ, 1994); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2002); Susan Kinsgsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).

life and suggested that women's gains had come at the expense of men's losses.[15] In fact, women's gains were often illusionary. Though women made some progress toward equality, social and economic inequality between men and women continued and even grew at war's end.[16] In 1918, women over age thirty gained the vote: the so-called Matrons Act enfranchised 6 million women but kept the age high enough to make sure that female voters did not outnumber men. But after garnering the vote for women, feminism receded from the political stage. Women were forced from their jobs as men demobilized.[17] Fewer women were employed in 1921 than had been in 1911. In addition, there was a great focus on the young single girl as a cause of social disorder, and such women became objects of contempt, bitterness, and aggression. Supposedly struck with "khaki fever" during hostilities, the young single woman was thought to embody the excesses of the postwar world. Hedonistic, pleasure-seeking boyettes or flappers smoked, drank cocktails, and engaged in sordid love affairs. In fashion, in fiction, and in politics, the modern girl marked the age.

All of these ideas about gender roles, war, trauma, modernism, and history circulated in interwar society, and all of them became fodder for people's sexual scripts. They affected people's sense of themselves and allowed them to rewrite the stories they told. It is against this backdrop that *London Life* began to flourish. The magazine became a place for the consideration of broad changes to British social and cultural life but one without the pesky demands of rationality or even honesty. Instead, it became a place to work out ideas on gender, sexuality, trauma, pleasures, and the self through the anonymity of the correspondence column.

The combination of low illiteracy rates and the broad suppression of books on sexuality made magazines a particularly important source for information about sex during the interwar years.[18] The generation coming of age in the 1920s and 1930s saw reading as a part of their lives, but books about sex remained hard to access. Libraries refused to stock risqué novels and sexological works by Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing.[19] Fearing fines, impris-

[15] Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York, 1988), 19–20.

[16] Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York, 1987), 149–75.

[17] Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640–1990* (New York, 1999), 285–86, 292–93.

[18] Illiteracy, measured by the inability to sign one's name, had fallen to one percent of the population by 1914. Further, a survey published by Mass-Observation in 1947 suggested that "only 3 per cent of the general population said they never read anything at all." See Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (Basingstroke, 2009), 29; Mass-Observation, *The Press and Its Readers* (London, 1949), 11. Scholars have noted the long history of censorship and suppression by the British state and government-sanctioned agencies. See, for example, H. Montgomery Hyde, *A History of Pornography* (New York, 1965); Peter Fryer, *Mrs. Grundy: Studies in English Prudery* (New York, 1964); Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge, 2006); Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York, 1987); Alan Travis, *Bound and Gagged: A Secret History of Obscenity in Britain* (London, 2000); Adam Parkes, *Modernism and the Theater of Censorship* (New York, 1996); Elisabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca, NY, 2007); Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), and "Censorship in Inter-war Britain: Obscenity, Spectacle, and the Workings of the Liberal State," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 61–83.

[19] For the discussion of censorship in libraries, see Anthony Hugh Thompson, *Censorship in Public Libraries in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century* (Epping, 1975); Judy Mabro, *I Ban Everything: Free Speech and Censorship at Oxford* (Oxford, 1985).

onment, and hard labor, most booksellers stocked only legal books.[20] As a result, those who actively looked for information about sexuality often had a hard time finding it.[21]

One source of information proliferated, however: individuals could eke out a sense of sex from materials at the newsagent's shop. "Every district, even the poorest," had a few newsstands that sold magazines and newspapers.[22] George Orwell offers a compelling description of the place of such shops in the local community: "You never walk very far through any poor quarter in any big town without coming upon a small newsagent's shop. The general appearance of these shops is always very much the same: a few posters for the *Daily Mail* and the *News of the World* outside, a poky little window with sweet-bottles and packets of Players, and a dark interior smelling of liquorish allsorts and festooned from floor to ceiling with vilely printed twopenny papers, most of them with lurid cover illustrations in three colours."[23] Intellectuals recognized that periodicals shaped the tastes and minds of the population.[24] "Probably the contents of these shops is the best indication of what the mass of the English people really thinks and feels. Certainly nothing half so revealing exists in documentary form. Best-seller novels, for instance tell one a great deal, but the novel is aimed almost exclusively at people above the £4-a-week level."[25]

A newsstand magazine, *London Life* boasted a circulation at over fifty-five thousand before the Great War, according to David Kunzle, and this figure rose throughout the interwar years. Advertisements for the magazine were placed on "1,000 cinema screens throughout Britain" in 1928, and it was available in railway stations across India.[26] At first glance, *London Life* looked like any other glamour magazine. It featured publicity stills from MGM and Universal studios, gossip and fashion columns, racy fiction, and expository essays. However, rather than a random assortment of spicy articles, the magazine had a series of interlocking stories and interests that were noted by the readers. As one reader explained, "Your paper has the advantage of being different. At the first perusal the reader feels that he has stumbled upon a new and amusing kind of magazine, but after a couple of months' regular reading it dawns upon them that you are catering for readers of a limited taste. Long hair, high heels and corsetting really only appeals to a few stalwarts who write to you in order to ride their pet hobby horse."[27]

The correspondence became central to the magazine and by the 1930s formed the basis of "specials." Other magazines that had flirted with correspondence in

[20] Booksellers tried to avoid stocking obscene books. See, for example, Memo regarding M. W. J. Magenis, n.d., The National Archives (TNA): PRO, HO45/15139.

[21] Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York, 2001), 133.

[22] Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 2000), 10.

[23] George Orwell, "Boys Weeklies," in *An Age like This*, vol. 1 (New York, 1968), 460.

[24] Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain* (New York, 1994), 1.

[25] Orwell, "Boys Weeklies," 461.

[26] Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*, 212.

[27] G. Latimer, "Appeal to Silent Readers," *London Life*, 24 August 1935, 26.

the past had become legendary in certain circles.[28] Indeed older copies of such magazines continued to circulate in the obscene book trades as did clipping files from those magazines.[29] Magazines like *English Woman's Domestic Magazine*, *Bits of Fun*, and *Photo Bits* made use of readers' letters, but *London Life* made correspondence its central and most compelling feature.[30] By 1939, the publisher proudly noted the relationship with readers as a selling point to newsstands; according to the editor, "the novelty about 'London Life' is that it is very largely written by its readers."[31] *London Life*'s correspondence column multiplied into a series of columns named "What Our Readers Have to Say," "Letters from London Lifers," "Readers Views On This That and The Other," and "Correspondence."

Previous scholarship has suggested that the editor wrote much of the correspondence.[32] This question of the truthfulness of the correspondence column goes back to the period itself. One correspondent writing from Bristol in 1930 argued that most letters were faked. The editors tried to correct that misapprehension: "We never forward letters, not even to 'Sporty Wife,' but we can assure you that she is a delightful lady and not a 'fat male journalist.'"[33] Determining whether the editor and his paid writers or unpaid readers wrote these letters remains central to a methodological approach to the publication then and now.

Though not conclusive, when taken together a variety of evidence suggests that readers wrote to *London Life*. Starting in 1927, the editor insisted on having a full name and address for correspondents even if that name was not used in the column itself: "All letters to the Editor must be accompanied by the names and addresses of the writers, not necessarily for publication but as a guarantee of good faith."[34] This insistence on a good faith declaration of identity suggests that the editor was as concerned with veracity as the readers. The magazine also created a short editorial reply column to provide information, respond to queries, and counter correspondents' claims. There would be few reasons for such a column

[28] See, for example, the Louise Lawrence Collection at the Kinsey Institute. Lawrence informed Alfred Kinsey about the transvestite and transsexual community in California after World War II. In her collection are newspaper clippings, letters, and scrapbooks about cross-dressing and sadomasochism from the 1890s and 1900s. She also copied materials from her own collection and from her colleagues and friends about those topics for Kinsey, including magazines like *Illustrated Bits*, *London Life*, *New Fun* and books like *Gynecocracy*. The materials accumulated by George Ives also stand as evidence to this claim. His scrapbooks included topics like murders, punishments, freaks, crime and punishment, cross-dressing, homosexuality, and cricket scores. See Paul Sieveking, *Man Bites Man* (London, 1981).

[29] An example of the trade in older magazines comes from the correspondence of Mervyn Hyde and William Benbow, TNA: PRO, CRIM 1/234. See also H. G. Cocks, *Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column* (London, 2009), chap. 5.

[30] For a description of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* from the 1860s, see Margaret Beetham, "'Natural but Firm': The Corset Correspondence in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*," *Women: A Cultural Review* 2, no. 2 (1991): 163–67.

[31] The Publisher, "Notice to Newsagents" *London Life*, 2 December 1939, 4.

[32] Edward Shorter suggests that the editors themselves wrote the letters, though he provides no evidence for his claim. Shorter, *Written in the Flesh*, 223. Valerie Steele (*The Corset*, 90) argues that letters like those in *London Life* and the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, an earlier publication, should be read not as readers' letters but as fantasies that reveal "the existence of sexual subcultures." In contrast, David Kunzle leaves room for the existence of the letter writers, though he too stresses the fantasy space that such correspondence created.

[33] Answers to correspondents, D. S. F. Harris (Bristol), *London Life*, 6 December 1930, 27.

[34] *London Life*, 12 February 1927, 26–27.

if the entire correspondence column had been written in house. Photos, apparently provided by readers, appeared with correspondence in the 1930s. People sent in pictures of themselves amputated, booted, cross-dressed, dressed in high heels, with their hair down, and on horseback. Amateurish lighting and masked anonymous subjects bolstered the claim that readers sent in the images. Readers responded to each other's letters and photos to ask for further images and more information. In "Questions for 'Corset Wearer,'" one writer asked for pictures and wondered whether "Corset Wearer" would reduce her waist further. Another writer, called "Inquisitive," demanded visual proof that women wore high heels, because "seeing is believing."[35]

Companies, like the mail order firm Charles and Co., committed to long-term advertisements.[36] The same ads for birth control, photos, and books ran week after week, year after year, changing only slowly with the incorporation of new visuals like previews of racy photos. Other companies also featured long-term ads in the magazine. Advertisements such as "Corsets and Belts of all Descriptions for LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. Tiny Waists our Specialty" and "High-Heeled Shoes and Boots All Sizes in Stock" that extolled the availability of a private fitting room also demonstrate a relationship between fetishists and the magazine. Advertisers to *London Life* offered wares that served men and women interested in corsets, high heels, personal portraits, birth control, photographs, and racy books. This plethora of services provided mail-order access to products and to a stylistic vocabulary in body modification and methods of self-display that might well not be available in readers' localities. Clearly, the publication was tightly tied to specific communities that advertisers recognized.

These pieces of evidence when taken together suggest that individuals wrote to the correspondence columns. However, even if the letters are authentic in the sense that they were written by someone other than the editor or staff, they might still not address reality in a straightforward way. Someone might write a letter but be deluded or lying. Thus, the letter would be real but would not accurately illustrate something about lived experience in any robust way. This second sense of authenticity recognizes the ways that the column allowed people to invent and reinvent a sense of gender and sexuality. A frequent columnist, "Sporty Wife" might or might not have been female. "Betty B." might not have ridden a human pony.

Readers articulated concerns about this second sense of authenticity on a regular basis. Frequent calls for photographs of contributors were most often ignored; on the rare occasions when contributors complied with such requests, the photos deflated their value. For instance, calls for photos of "Sporty Wife" and her lingerie-

[35] Bozo, "Questions for Corset Wearer," and Inquisitive, "Doubts 'High-Heeler's' Bona-Fides" *London Life*, 28 November 1931, 77.

[36] The father and original proprietor, Charles Froment Hayes, was convicted twice for obscenity: on 9 July 1890 he was sentenced to three months' hard labor, and on 19 February 1901 he was sentenced to six months' hard labor for mailing indecent matter; Jesse W. Keech, Chief Inspector, Report, Metropolitan Police, CID New Scotland Yard, June, 1935, TNA: PRO, MEPO3/2459. After the father died in 1931, the son, Charles Harold James Haynes, took over the business and continued the enterprise until after World War II despite arrest, fines, and continued surveillance; report, Metropolitan Police, CID, 29 December 1936, TNA: PRO, MEPO3/12459; report, Metropolitan Police, St. Ann's Road Station, "n" division, 7 December 1950, TNA: PRO, MEPO3/2459.

clad curves had been frequent: "'Sporty Wife' must indeed have some beautiful undies, and she certainly must have a charming figure. Why not publish a photo of her?"[37] However, when she provided a photo, it showed the distance between fantasies of her person and the realities of bodies. As one letter writer explained, "We are not the only ones sadly disillusioned by 'Sporty Wife's' photos. (She may as well retire)."[38] The readers' desires for proof ran aground on a more important need for fantasy.

The veracity of the stories as lived experience mattered less than the fact that such stories were told and retold. Something compelling came out of the process of storytelling itself, something recognized at the moment. Though such magazines might be written off as mere materials for masturbators—and, no doubt, many readers used them as masturbation aids—they offered both something less and something more than pornography. The laws about obscenity guaranteed that nothing beyond the occasional indiscreet nipple or climactic lip-lock happened in the magazine's pages. While *London Life* was racy, it was not exactly pornographic, and if people masturbated to its pages, they did so over images and ideas of something other than sexual intercourse.[39] But these magazines also offered something more: they let people script themselves as they wanted to be, whether male or female, sporty or rubber-clad, in ways that real life might not have allowed. If people masturbated over fantastical projections of themselves and others, then those projections tell us something about what they found compelling.

To make sense of these desires, this article takes its cues from queer studies with its focus on the contextual formation of sexuality and in its willingness to consider indeterminacy. Queer scholars have charted queer existence in ways that emphasize temporal and geographic variation and their accounts stress the ways in which individuals built a sense of themselves from a variety of cultural and social meanings.[40] Harry Cocks, in his analysis of nineteenth-century London, describes a historical sense of selfhood that remains irreducible to acts or identities. Matt Houlbrook considers London between the end of the Great War and the publication of the Wolfenden Report as a place that supported homosex without necessitating homosexual identities. And Laura Doan explores sapphic fashioning against and around the emergence of legal and medical wrangling over lesbianism. Each of these scholars stresses how people told complicated accounts of desire that remained irreducible.[41] The emphasis on the specificity and indeterminacy of

[37] Freda, "What I Like in 'London Life,'" *London Life*, 3 January 1931, 27.

[38] The Scribe, "What We Think of 'London Life,'" *London Life*, double issue, 29 August 1931, 46.

[39] The definition of pornography has generated any number of position papers, monographs, books, and essays to no clear consensus. Instead of looking for an unchanging definition and seeing whether *London Life* would fit, it becomes more relevant to say whether the state treated it as obscene. Though there were a large body of magazines deemed obscene and confiscated by Customs and the Postal Office, *London Life* remained legal, though it received complaints, and the Home Office kept an eye on it. For a discussion of the evolution of pornography as a form and as a definition, see Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography* (New York, 1993); and Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*. For a discussion of obscenity in the interwar years, see Lisa Z. Sigel, "Censorship in Inter-war Britain."

[40] H. G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2003); Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914* (Cambridge, 2003); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago, 2006); Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*.

[41] Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xiv.

desires allows them to explore the ways that individuals in the past saw themselves not as gay or straight, not as committing acts or articulating identities but as telling stories that were labile stories of desire.

If queer studies offers a way to envision *London Life*, the magazine offers queer studies descriptions of a wide array of desires that have gone underestimated in the historical record.[42] Writers to the magazine did not adhere to clear categories of sexual identity and instead mixed and matched like teenagers at a jumble sale. The evidence in *London Life*'s letters extends the impact of queer theory.[43] The overlapping desires in the magazine were queer in that the correspondents referred to themselves using the lingo of bent or odd but also in that their sense of identity remained indeterminate and irreducible despite the concurrent articulation of categories by sexologists. While contemporary sexologists parsed desires into ever finer categories that supposedly affected how people saw themselves, the evidence from popular magazines suggests that people's own self definitions mattered more.[44] Alison Oram's analysis of cross-dressing women in popular magazines found that such stories ignored the sexological conception of pathologies.[45] Descriptions in the pages of *London Life* likewise seem to ignore sexology.[46] Instead, letters on the topics of boxing girls, corsets, and amputees demonstrate how writers invested these themes with erotic energy, how they constructed sexuality in relation to context and history, and how they fashioned themselves as sexual subjects.

BOXING GIRLS

In the interwar world, concerns over the modern girl and her reliability troubled society to no end, particularly before she proved herself as a conscientious part of the body politic. Questions over her dress, her manners, her morals, and her role preoccupied writers in a variety of publications.[47] Against this backdrop, it should come as no surprise that the figure of the modern girl gained a remarkable salience in *London Life*. The question of women's metaphoric strength became literal in *London Life*'s frequent references to boxing and wrestling. From its inception, the correspondence column featured letters from girl boxers and wrestlers that pitted

[42] Matt Houlbrook, "Sexing the History of Sexuality," *History Workshop Journal* 60, no. 1 (Autumn, 2005): 216–22, esp. 217.

[43] That extension of queer theory makes sense given that the division between straight and gay as an organizing principle remains recent; David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, 2002), 3.

[44] According to Foucault's model of identity-formation, once codified, these typologies affected how people saw themselves. Rita Felski, introduction to *Sexology in Culture: Labeling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago, 1998), 2.

[45] Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (New York, 2007), 4.

[46] Most famously, Richard von Krafft-Ebing defined sexuality by its pathologies and each volume of his work included ever finer distinctions. See Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago, 2000); and Renate Hauser, "Krafft-Ebing's Psychological Understanding of Sexual Behavior," in *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: A History of Attitudes to Sexuality*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge, 1992), 210–27, for discussions of his rubric for understanding sexuality.

[47] Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press, 1918–1978* (Oxford, 2009).

these amazons against each other and against young men. As early as 1923, Marie and Doris Ilkey wrote of wrestling against Marie's brother. As these writers claimed: "I soon had him on his back, though, through a favorite throw of mine, and pressed his shoulders firmly to the mat, and then sat on his chest a few minutes. My girl chum Doris (a pretty flapper of 15) also had a bout with him, and was not long before she too, threw him, and was soon pressing his shoulders close to the mat and keeping him there some time."[48] The figures of these girls, plump, strong, and well-developed, became punitive and erotic at the same time.

People writing to the columns reveled in the strength of female bodies and found in the pages of *London Life* a place where women could brag of their prowess. Writers took pride in women's ability to muscle men into a position of submission. The ability to force men into a supposedly feminine helplessness had its own erotic appeal as a "Muscular Miss" made clear. "I find that, thanks to my extraordinary strength, I am easily more than a match for the average man, and there is nothing I like more than to feel one of the so-called stronger sex struggling helplessly when I get a good grip on him!"[49] The writer understood the gender codes of female weakness and male strength but delighted at their inversion.

In another such letter, the writer says she never had the luck to see a girl boxer or wrestler, but she did see a young woman chastise a man. "Freda" then recounts the comeuppance of a male manager who tormented his female workers in a munitions factory during the war. "Tiny," a woman who stood five feet eleven inches according to the writer, clocked the manager when he called her an "ugly-sounding name." She then "got hold of him by the back of the neck and forced him across a bench. After a sharp struggle she had him prepared for his punishment. He was actually spanked by her with a heavy hand."[50] This story explicated a link between male infantilization and female dominance, though the backdrop of war work muted the gender politics. Instead of undercutting all men, Tiny emasculated only those puny and cowardly men on the home front who interfered with female war workers.

Female wrestling allowed viewers a wide range of reactions from amazement to disgust, titillation to revulsion. A photograph of female wrestlers also made women's strength subject to erotic display. This photograph depicts a nightclub with men dressed in evening wear seated at tables alongside the mat where two women wrestle dressed only in brassieres, camisoles, tights, and ballet shoes. The caption reads "The beginning of a half-Nelson between two girl wrestlers who were photographed wrestling vigorously on the mat before spectators at the famous Bal Tabarin Cabaret, Paris, where wrestling bouts between women occur nightly."[51] The lure of the female wrestler came from the image of half-naked women grappling. The delights of such sights could be multifold: these displays showed off the wrestler's erotic curves, promised a display of female dominance and submission, and raised the possibility of sartorial misadventure and accidental nudity.

The magazine also allowed the confession of male weakness and subjugation to

[48] In the column, the writer suggested that the two girls were "chums," but they signed their letter as Marie and Doris Ilkley, "Wrestling for Girls," *London Life*, 11 August 1923, 4.

[49] Muscular Miss, "Self-Defense for Girls," *London Life*, 30 May 1931, 43.

[50] Freda H., "How A Girl Punished A Bully," *London Life*, 1 December 1923, 6.

[51] *London Life*, 4 October 1930, photgraph on 8.

female strength. Another letter, "Wrestling Girl Defeats Soldier," made the links between men's weakness, female freaks, and erotic subjugation explicit. The letter described a soldier's experience in Cairo in 1916 when he saw an exhibition of female wrestlers associated with a circus. A "Greek Amazon" challenged him. "I prepared to meet my fate, which was soon upon me. What happened I don't quite know, for I was speedily in such a position that I was totally incapable of movement. I was lying flat on my chest, head firmly wedged between her thighs, which were exerting great pressure, while my arms were drawn up tightly behind my back." A second bout took place and she again pinned him. "She next proceeded to secure my arms at the wrists, and inconveniently bent them across her own outstretched legs. I was thus in a somewhat humiliating position, for my opponent was sitting her full weight on my face; and being breathless and helpless, I speedily acknowledged her as my conqueror."[52] The letter illustrated a form of female dominance located somewhere between humiliation and eroticism. The physicality of these sports tested new models of corporeality for women in ways that writers found strange and compelling.[53] According to one writer, "reading the letters on 'The Dominance of Woman' in your very original paper" encouraged him to write. He related that his girlfriend always bested him at wrestling. "My fiancee is a very well-built, powerful girl, and although I am no weakling, I have to admit that she is my superior in physical strength. Many are the wrestling bouts indulged in, and invariably I finish up on the floor with my fair adversary sat upon me." He seemed undeterred by his frequent losses and only hoped that one day he would "prove the victor' and "get his own back."[54] The modern girl, in such letters, proved a fascinating spectacle well worth watching and grappling with in all her muscled strength.

Boxing and wrestling allowed readers opportunities to consider the new place of women in society. In some sense, these pages saw the strong young flapper take on all comers and win. Certainly, they gave people a place to write about girls' new sporty strength. The anonymity of the correspondence column meant that it could function as a place where people could indulge their desires to envision girls' physical strength and bodies forced into submission. Writers to these columns could pretend to be girls, their victims, bystanders or all three and could indulge their fantasies. The motif of the boxing girl allowed writers to actualize a discomfort with new gender roles in surprising ways. Readers could watch girls get pummeled and pinned and could watch girls punch and control. As these letters and photos made clear, wrestling exposed bodies to examination by placing them in unnatural and revealing positions. These stories made room for submissive men and dominant women. They allowed readers multiple approaches to come to terms with the modern girl, who was supposedly changing society in strange and uncomfortable ways. They could watch her punch her sister, eroticize her as she lay pinned to the mat, could watch her sit on the faces of other men, or visualize her beaten and bloody in the ring. What could better signify the possibilities of the modern age than to watch the sporty girl wrestle with all its possibilities?

[52] M.G.C, "Wrestling Girl Defeats Soldier," *London Life*, 1 November 1930, 27.
[53] Harold L. Weston, "Wonderful Women Wrestlers," *London Life*, 22 December 1923, 22.
[54] Gymn, "Woman's Superior Strength," *London Life*, 17 August 1929, 26.

CORSETS AND NOSTALGIA

Across most of the letters to the correspondence section, the figure itself became the raw matter that let individuals work out the volatile relationships of gender, sexuality, and history. If girl wrestling and boxing came to speak to the modern age, then the corset became a nostalgic marker of the past. Writers longed for a day when girls had discipline and figures were trained.

Figure training in the letters to *London Life* came to be linked with repression. Writers to *London Life* not only believed in Victorian repression, they eroticized it. In many ways, they provide evidence for Foucault's claims that the endless discourse around repression and control incited desires. Writers saw the corset as the marker of that repression and, in longing to return to it, they hoped to reclaim the erotic tensions of renunciation and control. Although nostalgia rarely fits into discussions of sexuality, the focus on the corset suggests that it has a more central function to sexual processes than is generally recognized.

Though corsets changed throughout the nineteenth century in style, shape, and even function, they nonetheless continued to mark out femininity, particularly for middle-class society.[55] By the end of the nineteenth century, images of the corset had become overtly sexual; both pornography and advertisements featured corseted women set in intimate spaces.[56] Rational dress reform, feminist agitation, and new models of health that emphasized exercise and fitness routines ended the mandate for corsets, though it took the exigencies of the war to make it clear that the demise of the corset would be more than temporary. By the end of the war, the Edwardian matronly silhouette that relied on the corset had been replaced by a new waiflike form.[57] Against this new model of the body, the older corseted model had continued relevance as a point of comparison and nostalgia.

London Life fed an interest in corsets through correspondence columns and articles and features in the magazine. The regular fashion column suggested that corsets were coming back into fashion.[58] Hollywood contributed to the imagery with frequent photos of Mae West and the endless delights provided by the corset scene in *Gone with the Wind*. A backlog of underwear scenes from historical venues bolstered the content. Articles about corset wearing, such as like "Figure Training throughout The Ages," showed historical versions of the corset from the Greek girdle to the Egyptian sash.[59]

Aficionados of corset memories honed their recollections of the past and recirculated them in the correspondence columns.[60] One writer spoke of her induction into "the wasp-waist cult," as she called it, twenty-five years earlier.[61] Another story, titled "Wasp Waists on the Continent: What a Globe Trotter Has Seen," provided a recollection of unspecified "earlier times" when continental girls went corseted. The narrator described his lacing of two young girls, Olga and Zita, in

[55] Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (New York, 2001), 210–11.

[56] Ibid., 200.

[57] Cheryl Buckley and Hillary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present* (London, 2002), 87.

[58] The Dresser, "Fashions, Fads and Fancies," *London Life*, 22 September 1928, 15.

[59] Madeline Alverez, "Figure Training throughout the Ages," *London Life*, 27 January 1934, 21.

[60] C. H., "Wasp-Like Waists," and Staylace, "Historical Tight-Lacers," *London Life*, 19 April 1924, 15.

[61] Corset, "The Wasp-Waist Cult," *London Life*, 2 January 1926, 15.

a brothel. "It was now Zita's turn. . . . Soon she, too, was being clasped by the mauve corset she wore as in a vice. She was more emotional and freer in her exclamations than Olga. As the lace slipped through, and her tiny waist became more wasp-like, she murmured, 'Pull, oh pull, lace me in two! I am swooning with ecstasy. Oh, don't loose or let the lace slip! I can scarcely breathe, but I am thrilled. Lace me! Pull yet harder!'"[62] Such scenarios played with fantasies of corset memories. The writer detailed a model of female desire in which women found pleasure through constriction, pain, and self-admiration and constructed a past in which brothel scenes allowed for tight-laced fantasies.

Curiously, in these descriptions, though men insisted on tight lacing, women experienced it as ecstasy and men merely served their desires. Most writers interested in the corset tied the garment to sadomasochism. In this model the greater one's submission, the stronger the ability to bring the other sex to its knees. A serialized article titled "Dora, the Dominant: Early Adventures" explained a young dominatrix's relationship to corsetry: "For, as I can clearly see now, even at that tender age my thoughts were turning more and more to the possibilities of dominating the opposite sex. . . . I certainly did realize that to attract the opposite sex by one's face, one's figure, and one's clothes—to say nothing of personality—was one step on the road to dominating them; and this, I think, nay, I know—was the real reason which lay below my desire to appear in public—and particularly at school—in, so to speak, full warpaint."[63] Through figure training and confinement, Dora became dominant. Tight-laced stays enslaved men with desire even as they constricted women with pain. Women became dominant by causing themselves pain while men became weak with the sight of women's transformed bodies.

The tight-laced girl was the antithesis of the girl wrestler in that she could barely walk, bend or stand, let alone pin a man to the ground. Nonetheless, corsets and wrestling made similar physical and emotional demands, according to letter writers. Reforming the female figure was seen as an act of courage and training. The process of renunciation took the same sort of courage as stepping in the ring. Rather than shying away from the pain caused by corsets, writers enjoyed it and stressed that through the ability to withstand pain, women became dominant: "Feet were crushed into tiny high laced boots; calves strained on stilt heels and cased in taut hose. Corsets of relentless strength were literally screwed about the body, while the longest and most closely fitting gloves imprisoned the arms. To have walked at all, let alone gracefully, must have been difficult."[64] Figure training in these accounts constituted a form of physical punishment as demanding as blows that female boxers faced. The ability to suffer united both female forms. Both triumphed over their bodies, pain, and men.

Writers suggested that women experienced exhilaration from attending to the body. In these letters, the strictures that literally erased their forms seemed to liberate their pleasures. "Only those who have overcome the first strangeness can realize the intense exhilaration and joie-de-vivre that is the accompaniment of extreme tight lacing. The whole body feels light and buoyant, and there is a sense

[62] "Wasp-Waist on the Continent," *London Life*, 31 January 1931, 50–51.
[63] "Dora, the Dominant," *London Life*, 31 January 1931, 40.
[64] A.D.T., "Victorian Figure Training," *London Life*, 30 May 1931, 42.

of poise and alertness that nothing else can give."[65] The body in these descriptions became a buoyant and sealed version of its sexual self.

Helplessness added to the appeal of figure training. The corset, and the accompanying high heels and tight gloves, caused a heightened sense of bodily awareness and a recognition of physical helplessness. Writers hyped a sort of controlled descent into a stylized invalidism. One writer, who wore a steel band around the waist, praised it for the vulnerability that it produced. The letter, titled "The Appeal of Complete Weakness," valued such physical and psychological states: "And it has the additional merit of causing a delightful numbness below the waist, which Clara Elwell also mentions. All this, if one wears very high heels, produces an extraordinary feeling of helplessness which is quite different from that which is enjoyed in actual bondage."[66] All this demanded a willing devotee. Indeed, the necessity of attendants became part of the pleasure.[67] The female body formed the raw matter to be disciplined but within a set of social relations that invested time and care in her physique.

Though writers stated that women, especially mothers and aunts, forced girls into figure training, they also suggested that masculine pleasure and devotion became the reward for feminine pain and that men took pleasure in the role allotted them. As K.P. made clear, the lure of the corseted body tied him to his wife. "Later on in life the lady who honoured me by becoming my wife, and who had from girlhood cultivated, at her father's wish, the curved and rounded figure then considered attractive, soon found my liking for the article, its method of application and the result it brought about, and, like a sensible wife, played up to me by loitering over this portion of the daily morning or evening act." The corset demanded a stylized dressing and undressing that both wife and husband enjoyed. The wife made sure that her partner attended to her primping and the husband gave every indication of reveling in the tightening and loosening of the stays. The husband suggested that at his wife's urging, he too took up the corset. He finished his letter with a rather cryptic query worth thinking about for its refusal to mark out erotics in straightforward ways: "All I can add is, which you, Mr. Editor, will doubtless endorse, 'If this is pleasure, what is pain?'"[68]

AMPUTEES

If boxing girls spoke to ways that context informed desire and corsets to the ways that nostalgia sweetened it, then the focus on amputees brought the issue of displacement into the consideration of such longings. All three fixations spoke to the plasticity of the human figure and the ways that readers reworked the human form to fit with desires. However, more than other sorts of desires detailed in the pages of *London Life*, amputee fetishism raises questions about gender displacement and the erotics of trauma. Early expository essays and fiction in *London Life* set the stage for this extended interest. After a slow beginning in the early 1920s, there was a small spike in 1928 and then a sustained interest during the 1930s,

[65] Elsie J., "A Defense of the Wasp Waist," *London Life*, 12 November 1927, 31.
[66] A.C.B., "The Appeal of Complete Weakness," *London Life, 3* January 1931, 26.
[67] The Dresser, "High Legged Boots," *London Life*, 22 September 1928, 15.
[68] K.P., "If That Is Pleasure, What Is Pain," *London Life*, 6 December 1930, 26.

reaching a peak in 1940 against the growing violence of the next war, when the letters, and this analysis, end. All told, there are at least 322 letters and thirty-two short stories about amputees during this period.[69]

Early letters and essays displayed little of the sexual charge of later ones. Instead, they described amputation as part of a panoply of oddities. For example, a 1924 essay entitled "Marvellous Feats of One-Legged Dancers" recounted a number of men and women worldwide who laid claim to fame through their dance routines. Like many such stories embedded in the body of the magazine, this account combed the past for strange and distinctive figures. The column then mentioned a series of disabled men including Jack Joyce, who lost his leg in the war, and the Bistrews, two former French soldiers who performed publicly. A letter to the correspondence column that followed a few months later asked for swimming tips for the writer's sister.[70] The responses were informational and a back and forth of letters about girls' amputations began. *London Life* became a place to openly discuss disability in ways that more reputable venues did not allow. But, in response to fiction written by Wallace Stortt, an erotic strain began to emerge.

Stortt had read sexological explanations of fetishism but subsumed any traces of pathology beneath his descriptions of amputees.[71] His descriptions of girl amputees focused on the way that certain aspects became erotic, including a round and well-formed stump—"it put on flesh quickly until it had become quite plump and round"; a single leg beneath a dress—"a chic little one legged figure swinging neatly along"; one-legged dancing and hopping; and the dressing of the stump in silk and jewelry.[72] These key phrases recurred across his fiction and became tags of desire: "The display of the single leg below a short skirt, the magnetic appeal here always was in the contemplation of a perfectly fitting silk stocking and with the added appeal of the small, neat, only foot in a dainty, high heeled slipper, the various fascinating incidentals such as the expert use of neat slender crutches or the even more expert accomplishment of being able to dispense with crutches altogether and hop blithely and smoothly on a single foot—all were very important facets of the inextricable attraction onelegged [*sic*] girls had for me."[73]

Stortt's happily disabled beauty inhabited an edgy interwar world, dominated by speed and pleasures, the modern nightclub, and the automobile. She was as much a reflection of the dangers of modernism as the cocktail, the transatlantic flight, and the craze for the Charleston. As he described her character: "Her fads of to-day became the fashions of tomorrow."[74]

Most important to his model of desire was the idea of the gay and consenting girl. Girls not only had to be disabled, they also had to find an erotic appeal in

[69] My copies of these letters and stories comes from the website http://www.overground.be/londonlife/. It appears that these stories and letters came from someone's clipping file. The website thanks an anonymous friend for the scans or copies. I have checked the online version against print copies of *London Life* at the Kinsey Institute and found the transcriptions to be accurate.

[70] *London Life*, 4 October 1924, 14.

[71] Wallace Stortt, "The Fascination of the One-Legged Girl," *London Life*, 27 October 1928, 18–19.

[72] Wallace Stortt, "The Confessions of a One-Legged Bride," *London Life*, 26 July 1930, 16–17, 20–21, 24–25.

[73] Wallace Stortt, "The Strange Experiences of a Lover," *London Life*, pt. 2, 29 April 1933, 30–32.

[74] Wallace Stortt, "Dr. Nicholas," *London Life*, 8 December, 1928, 18–19, 22–23, 26–27, 30–31, 34: 34.

their disability. Stortt was so committed to the idea of gay and consenting women that his fiction skirted along the edge of cosmetic amputation. As one of his characters explained in "Dr Nicholas," perhaps his most famous short story, she consented to having all her limbs removed by a "queer" master of plastic surgery: "And, in my way, I'm quite as blameworthy as the doctor. But we are all queer in some way, Sonia—you, I, Tina, everybody. None of us is quite the same. It's a weird and wonderful world."[75] Stortt, for all of his self-consciousness, remained committed to seeing a love for amputees as part of a reciprocal relationship that suited both the whole man and amputee woman equally. According to his model, if men had a kink for female amputees, then perhaps women had the reciprocating desire to be amputated. "If the affection of certain men is for women in some way deficient, isn't it at least a very great possibility that certain women may wish to satisfy that preference?"[76]

At the same time that Stortt laid out erotic projections of the amputation through his fiction, disabled girls wrote into the column to discuss both the real and fantastical realms. Numerous constituencies made use of the pages. Some writers took up the same cues and projected themselves as girls with the same modern, eroticized sensibilities as Stortt's characters. In 1925, a woman wrote to the correspondence column advocating "pretty clothes and dainty footwear" to gain admiration from the opposite sex. That writer calling herself "One-Legged But High-Heeled" suggested that her sleeveless silk dress worn with skin-tight knickers, a silk stocking, and a four inch open-toed, high-heeled sandal accounted for her popularity with men. Clearly, this writer found some of the same visual cues as appealing as Stortt. Indeed, the early date of this letter suggests that this description might have influenced Stortt's later stories.[77] Another writer discussed helplessness in ways similar to characters in Stortt's fiction. The writer found that it provided a thrill: "My own utter helplessness somehow thrills me. It sounds crazy, I know, I think it is this acceptance of our utter dependence on others that keeps we legless folk interested in life."[78]

Other individuals used the magazine for very different purposes. Instead of seeing it as a place to exchange erotic thrills, they saw the correspondence columns as a clearinghouse for physical and emotional information. One writer requested advice about silk stump stockings, pretty crutches, and garters.[79] Another woman, L.N., asked about artificial limbs, writing in a second time when no one answered her first query.[80] "One-Legged Ursula" replied to the practical concerns put forward by those two writers.[81] The use of the column to exchange information was by far its minority purpose; in some sense, L.N. did not realize the extent to which the magazine dealt in fantasies of limblessness rather than its practicalities. Her naive reading of the magazine suggested the ways that even deeply engaged readers

[75] Ibid., 34.

[76] Wallace Stortt, "The Strange Quest of Anthony Dress," *London Life*, 31 August 1929, 31, 36, 37, 40; continued on 31 August 1940, 10, 27–34, 39–40.

[77] "One Legged but High-Heeled," *London Life*, 22 August 1925, 15.

[78] Legless, "Why the Limbless Are Interested in Life," *London Life*, 11 May 1935, 23.

[79] A New Monopede, "A Little Advice Wanted," *London Life*, 24 November, 1934, 48.

[80] L.N., "Advice Wanted," *London Life*, 8 December 1934, 23; L.N., "Advice Wanted," *London Life*, 23 February 1935, 9.

[81] One Legged-Ursula, "A Cripple's Story: Peg-Leg or Crutch?" *London Life*, 9 March 1935, 22.

could overlook its sexual implications.[82] When readers asked for direct advice, correspondents largely stayed silent. Instead, the magazine offered its own set of almost unattainable physical and emotional ideals: grace, beauty, optimism, sex appeal, high heels, and fashionable clothes.

Furthermore, some correspondents protested amputee fetishism. "Forward Minx," a frequent contributor to the correspondence columns, explicitly linked the trauma of veterans' disabilities with the fiction of Wallace Stortt, whom she reviled. "A crippled person should evoke nothing but sympathy. They are so dependent upon others, and miss so much life has to offer. (I talk from experience, as my brother lost one of his legs on the Somme.) I think therefore that to try to thrust sex appeal upon women whose bodies lack limbs is positively disgusting. It is unnatural and horrible, and I condemn it as the worst possible taste."[83]

Four years later, the issue of eroticizing disability surfaced again. "Crippled Girl" leveled criticism at women's letters that described their attire and high heels. She disliked the erotic modeling of disability. She hated the markers that Stortt and letter writers liked to dwell on like the "short skirts slit up the sides, and long silk hose, and high heels" that women described "in order to add allure to their one-leggedness." Instead of creating narratives of their own erotic potential, "Crippled Girl" suggested that women should disregard their infirmities and not draw attention to them. She suggested that "this unhealthy cult of short-skirted defiance by monopedes and cripples will only add to the great burdens we must already carry." In short, according to her account, the disabled should present themselves as dainty, graceful, and unassuming rather than practice a "perverse parading of our ills in the world."[84]

Readers rejected these critiques of amputee eroticism. One of the more interesting replies came from another writer who stressed the compensatory pleasures of being eroticized. Helen Fivetoes responded to her by asking for psychological room. "Be fair, 'Forward Minx,' and let we who are short a limb or who are attracted by the deficiency, have what little pleasure we can from reading about the subject."[85] Another reader, "Monopede Admirer," suggested that even if it "is a perversion, it is certainly a very innocent one." He continued, "Maybe it is a perversion, but then a salutary one!"[86] Another writer, this time the "Husband of Single-Heel," suggested that "Crippled Girl" was merely bitter in her "criticisms of her fellows" and that she should allow them to display their disabilities as they chose.[87] Despite her carefully articulated rejection of the erotic realignment done in the magazine, "Crippled Girl" received little more than a "try and cheer up" from other correspondents.[88]

Clearly, more than one group of people made use of the magazine and each group had its own distinct vision of how amputees should present themselves to the world. The issue of how amputees should model themselves physically and

[82] L.N., "Where Were Her Sympathizers?" *London Life*, 22 June 1935, 20.
[83] "A Welcome Criticism," *London Life*, 22 August 1931, 11.
[84] Crippled Girl, "Advice to Monopedes," *London Life*, 19 October 1935, 24.
[85] "A Reply to 'Forward Minx,'" *London Life*, 12 September 1931, 27.
[86] Monopede Admirer, "Monopede Psychology," *London Life*, 9 November 1935, 22.
[87] Husband of Single-Heel, "The Penalty of a Leg" *London Life*, 21 December 1935, 23.
[88] Magpie S., "A Definition," *London Life*, 25 April 1936, 9.

psychologically carried a good bit of emotional weight for these writers.[89] For some the idea of eroticizing a hardship only opened one up to further ridicule in an already hard world. For others, this psychological space for projections hurt no one and formed a harmless pleasure. Despite the split between the two camps, a number of questions arise that neither group was willing to acknowledge, let alone address: why girls? Why voluntary amputation? And why otherwise healthy, nubile bodies?

London Life discussed a particular sort of disability and very carefully reconstructed the social and cultural context of disability that deflected social conditions into a funhouse alternative. *London Life*'s formulation of amputees resolutely ignored the conditions of bodies and disability in the interwar world, thereby creating a way to accommodate a sexuality that might otherwise have been elided. The idea of bodies, especially the disabled woman's body, became reconstructed in these pages into an idea of bodies that recognized trauma but did not engage it. This disavowal becomes resonant in the context of the interwar years. As Seth Koven makes clear in his work on interwar disability, a great deal of cultural work happened around disability to deal with the issues that such bodies raised. According to Koven, "The British state and society constructed institutions and discourses that allowed them to simultaneously remember and forget. . . . The deformed children of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain and the tens of thousands of men who returned from the battlefronts of World War I permanently disabled, many lacking arms and legs, were dismembered persons in a literal sense but also in a social, economic, political, and sexual sense."[90] According to Joanna Bourke, 41,000 British soldiers lost limbs during the war; 272,000 suffered injuries to the limbs; over 65,000 suffered head wounds; and 89,000 suffered other damage.[91]

The timing of stories to *London Life*, given the broader reworking of trauma is significant. According to Modris Eksteins's examination of World War I, a period of disavowal after the war gave way to usable narratives in the late 1920s. Eksteins points out that the "'real war' ceased to exist in 1918. Thereafter it was swallowed by imagination in the guise of memory."[92] The wounded soldier might well have been rewritten in the pages of *London Life* into a psychological fascination with amputee girls. As one writer explained, his own war wounds resulted in his fascination with female amputees. In 1931, the male correspondent wrote that he enjoyed the letters from one-legged lady readers. He had married a one-legged woman whom he encouraged to wear four- to five-inch heels. What makes this writer particularly interesting was that he lost his leg during the war.[93] Another writer mentioned veterans as well and suggested that there might be a relationship between disabled men and the love of amputee girls. "Gladys" as she called herself, said that her husband Jim "lost his leg during the war." According to her, Jim

[89] This problem of how to model oneself is central to an understanding of the history of disability. See, for example, David Gerber, "Anger and Affability: The Rise and Representation of a Repertory of Self-Presentation Skills in a World War II Disabled Veteran," *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 5–27.

[90] Koven, "Remembering and Dismemberment," 1169.

[91] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 33.

[92] Eksteins, *Rite of Spring*, 297.

[93] A Happy Couple, *London Life*, 27 June 1931, 25.

had "the kink" for amputee girls to a remarkable degree. She noted that the "affinity caused by his own disability may be the reason for this."[94]

In the interwar context, disability could not be avoided. The emotional impact of such meetings could result in a fascination with disability and a psychosexual attempt to come to terms with it. Certainly, one writer to *London Life* saw the process in those terms. "During the many years which I spent as an inmate of hospitals and crippled children's homes, I found that many people were inclined to cherish or profess a morbid love for what they most hated or feared, and I think that if Wallace Stort [*sic*] and others confessed frankly that it was an inborn horror of being one-legged themselves that had inverted itself and emerged as an admiration for one of the opposite sex who happened to be so afflicted, they would really be telling the truth for once!"[95] According to her model, men's disgust transmuted itself into fascination; a fear for the integrity of their own bodies encouraged men's focus on girls' disabilities.

In this context, Freud's assessment of fetishism begins to make an eerie sort of sense. Freud suggested that a "horror of the mutilated creature" resulted in a fixation as a means of disavowal.[96] Disavowal did not mean rejection; instead, it became a way to refuse to acknowledge what one knew. According to Henry Kripps's reading of Freud, the fetish functioned as a memorial that safeguarded what could not be remembered directly. Perhaps, women's amputation screened other forms of disability.[97] Interwar amputee fetishism suggests a way to work through the trauma around disability that could not be expressed in other ways. Surrounding the amputation with a stump circlet, wrapping it in silk, dressing the body in high heels that played up the missing limb suggested one way of memorializing amputation. In a society rife with disability, amputee fetishism allowed an overt fascination with body modification and plasticity. It allowed an erotic reworking of pain into an idea of mutuality. The emotional conditioning of pain into the cheerful acceptance of disability and even a will to amputate in some of the accounts became a way of negotiating vulnerability and mitigating a horror of bodily dissolution.

These erotic rewritings of amputation had deeply gendered expectations and implications. Women acted as the agents in amputee fantasies. Through reading and writing those fantasies, men could explore the pleasures of passivity and dependence, rather than mastery and mutuality. By inhabiting the space of the female character, men might be able to enjoy passivity and helplessness, a rare opportunity for men whose gender roles demanded authority. Writers labeled themselves as women or men (or more often as girls or admirers), but whether or not the pseudonyms matched the biological sex cannot be known. In some ways, then, these fantasies could be liberating in that they could encourage individuals to shuck off those restrictions of personal desire they often faced. In another way, however, these renderings were not only conservative but painfully so because the mapping of qualities onto gender continued quite relentlessly. In these fantasies,

[94] Gladys, "Advice to Monopedes," *London Life*, 13 May 1933, 22.

[95] A One-Legged But Not Deluded Girl, "I Contradict Wallace Stort [*sic*]," *London Life*, 15 August 1936, 24.

[96] Louise Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism* (New York, 2006), 22.

[97] Henry Kripps, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), 7–8.

men carried their amputee girlfriends, they picked up their wives' crutches, and they admired women's cheerful courage in the face of disability. There was no reciprocity. Amputee men did not get to dance to the cheers of an admiring audience. No women or men swooped in to care for their stumps, and no one followed them admiringly down the streets. The few disabled men who wrote into *London Life*, including one man who asked whether lady readers "would feel a one-legged husband an utter impossibility, or whether my condition would excite their pity and admiration" received little in the way of advice or even shared fantasies.[98] No one could find room to imagine masculine helplessness as erotic or disabled masculinity as masterful. If men wanted to make use of the figure of the eroticized amputee, they needed to fit themselves into a feminized figure.

Thus, the development of shared sets of fantasies did not come without costs: some voices received support and admiration, and others received little support. Not all voices received equal recognition; indeed, the injunction against bitterness stifled conversations. The policing of emotional registers left little room for fantasies that deviated from a preferred form. The modern amputee girl, optimistic, curvy, and willing, became the poster girl to inject eroticism into the idea of disability. The insistence that girls bear the burden of modernity allowed disability to escape from the older models based on the crippled child and wounded soldier. Instead of pity and remorse, the figure of the amputee girl could excite a fascinated and horrified pleasure. As one letter writer resolutely explained men's investment in disabled girls, "he is not exactly in love, but is purely fascinated."[99] This fascination in one way negotiated between traumas that could neither be forgotten nor remembered; in another sense, however, this mediation edged out other sorts of conversations in the clamor for fantasy. The fantasy of disabled girls might have helped negotiate trauma, but the insistence on particular forms of that fantasy guaranteed that girls who wanted space in the correspondence columns were disregarded in favor of more appealing voices. Even in fantasy space, there was not enough room for everyone.

CONCLUSION

As letters to *London Life* demonstrate, writers' fixations happened in a cultural context that was changing, sometimes in painfully fast ways. Historical transformations created ruptures that played out in sexual and gender transformations. Sexual anxieties and desires emerged from the context of their times and spoke to the moments of their creation. Capturing the moment through a fetishistic practice allowed writers to engage with change in letter after letter. Letters to the correspondence column allowed writers to repeatedly, sometimes compulsively play and replay their reactions. However, these letters not only spoke to the specific time of their writing between 1923 and 1941, they also spoke to writers' sense of their place in history as writers squeezed their memories for glimpses of corsets past, refracted trauma into a usable present, and envisioned an edgy future engaged with modern girls. Whether rendered through modernism, nostalgia, or memorials

[98] Single Leg, "Questions for Girls to Answer" *London Life*, 19 October 1935, 24.
[99] Happy With One, "Happy One-Legged Mother and Wife" *London Life*, 13 April 1935, 22.

that screened the past and present, their sense of time created a context for their erotic desires. They wrote queer desires through a concept of history.

For all the urgency of their tellings, their accounts remained radically indeterminate. People occasionally called themselves "queer" or "odd," sometimes labeled their desires as "kinky," but rarely called themselves fetishists, inverts, heterosexuals, homosexuals, straight, gay, sadists, masochists, or voyeurs. Instead, they told complicated stories that remain irreducible. Their stories of self, tucked between ads for rubber wear, high heels, and "art photos" of nude models, provide a window into how consumer culture and the broader historical context were refracted onto objects and stories of pleasure. In weekly iterations, individuals communicated in an anonymous, decentralized fashion about their fervors and thereby honed their longings into exquisitely fine form. The distribution of these letters through the pages of *London Life* allowed a broad swath of society access to such stories. At six pence a week and written by and for its readers, the magazine offered widespread admission to a community based on queer and kinky pleasures.