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## Book Review: Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth Century Britain

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***Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth Century Britain.***  
**Deborah Cohler, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010,**  
**(296 pp), ISBN 978-008166-4976-1**

Reviewed by Sanya Osha<sup>1</sup>

The nation-state is the dominant arrangement for the organization of sociopolitical, economic and cultural existence but it is far from being the most ideal option to capture the multiplicity of social forms, cultures and practices. This becomes immediately evident after reading Deborah Cohler's highly intriguing book, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth Century Britain*.

The conventional discourses privilege the 'science' of sexology with the construction of modern sexual subjectivity. However, Cohler argues there are other equally important genealogies of sexual subjectivity to be engaged. Cohler studies how various sexual subjectivities emerged, gained in strength and dispersed under the aegis of nationalism and in grave times of national conflict. She focuses on the emergence of female homosexual identity in Britain around the period of the First World War and the eras after it. She suggests that the homefront in that seismic epoch, marked as it was, by conflict, anxiety and uncertainty, provided spaces for the articulation of supposedly deviant sexual and gender forms within the ambit of nationalism and empire building. In that period of chronic social upheaval, lesbians and transgendered women found spaces in which they could articulate oppositional identities within the British public sphere even when it purported to be staunchly in favor of narrow masculinist, sexist and racial views and norms. The advent of war introduced a genuine element of uncertainty on the homefront which in turn granted confidence to what were oppositional sexual and gender identities.

Cohler does not focus mainly on the canonical texts of sexology as they do not describe in totality the rich and varied nature of the field of sexualities. Instead, she reads literary texts, newspapers and periodicals as sources of fertile genealogical material. Emergent sexual identities and sexual norms outside the dominant nationalist script have always had a difficult time finding spaces for articulation and consolidation with broad British public culture and this of course applies to the public cultures of other nations as well. For instance, the notion of the 'invert' was first employed by early sexologists: 'Inversion' is a concept that was widely used by sexologists from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century to describe characteristics culturally assigned to one gender or sex that appears in the "opposite" sex" (p.xiv). Now, the term has become quite obsolete in view of the latest developments pertaining to knowledge on sexualities. The term invert came into public awareness along with other such 'Sapphist', 'lesbian' and 'homosexual'. But not all these terms or identities best describe post -9/11 sexual subjectivity. Instead it is more appropriate to think and talk in terms of transgendered identities such as female-to-males (FTMs), male-to-females (MTFs), drag queens, queens, butch lesbians and so on.

Cohler suggests that the articulation of these various sexual identities occurred under contexts of extreme persecution. For instance, as noted, the emergence of a distinctly female homosexual identity took place after the Great War of the last century.

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Cohler examines the contours of this specific identity by reading novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* all of which deal with female same-sex eroticism. Accordingly, these works in their various ways address the advent and consolidation of female homosexual identity in the period between the two wars of the last century.

She then makes an interesting maneuver. She attempts to read the assertions of sexual difference in the contemporary public culture of the United States after the 9/11 event. She does this by exploring the issue in Leslie Feinberg's 2006 novel, *Drag King Dreams*. The work depicts how within the context of state-sanctioned repression different outsider communities- transgendered people, Muslims and immigrants- work together in search of solidarity. In this way, traditional Jewish and Palestinian antagonism loses potency for the common goal of resisting police brutality in the streets of New York. American-born transgendered citizens experience disenfranchisement in the hands of the American state and thus align with Muslims and illegal immigrants who are regarded as non-citizens and live under the constant threat of imprisonment and deportation. The point is under the guise of nationalism and using the pretext of war, the American state frantically goes after its perceived enemies; sexual and gender non-conformists, Muslims and peaceniks. These persecuted outsiders in the bid for survival strive for solidarity across racial, gender, sexual, cultural and historical lines. Cohler takes us through Feinberg's fascinating novel in this way. Paradoxically state repression and generalized social conflict rather than cause the stifling of sexual and gender difference instead provide the occasion for the growth of the varied richness of the field of sexualities.

Interesting Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is not always pertinent to Cohler's points of entry. Foucault dwells upon the 'masturbating child of the bourgeois family, the 'hysterical woman', the Malthusian couple and the perverse adult" (p.xvii). Ann Laura Stoler has argued in *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's "History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (1995) that Foucault's main agglomeration of concerns is rather reductive. Stoler urges that the primitive, savage and colonized peoples generally are crucial in rendering any genealogy of sexuality legible. Cohler agrees with her. What is also discernible is the dominant and apparently unyielding state apparatuses often offer critical spaces for the articulation of multiple and oppositional sexualities in grim and uncertain times of sociopolitical upheaval. This is a point of view Cohler constantly stresses with fine and subtle argumentation.

The work should appeal to underground and mainstream audiences, academic and non-academic communities and a wide range of disciplines within the academy: literature, women and gender studies, cultural theory and the study of sexualities.