

*History, Department of*  
*History Theses*

---

*University of Puget Sound*

*Year 2017*

---

“You Can’t Dispose of Mercedes  
Lightly”: Mercedes de Acosta, Queer  
Women, and Queer Female Desire in the  
Early Twentieth Century

Katy Stehr  
kstechr@pugetsound.edu

This paper is posted at Sound Ideas.  
[http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/history\\_theses/24](http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/history_theses/24)

Katy Stehr

Professor Fry

HIST 400

“You Can’t Dispose of Mercedes Lightly”: Mercedes de Acosta, Queer Women, and  
Queer Female Desire in the Early Twentieth Century

Alice B. Toklas stated that “you can’t dispose of Mercedes lightly”; Cecil Beaton said that Mercedes was “very mannish but charming, kind, clever & interesting”, and Sybille Bedford “observed that Mercedes was a person of extremes, that people either loved her or hated her.”<sup>123</sup> Mercedes de Acosta (1893-1968) was a poet, playwright, and screenwriter in the early twentieth century; she was relatively well-known during her lifetime, but has since faded into obscurity. While she did have a husband for a while (Abram Poole, a painter), she kept her maiden name when she married and made no secret of her affairs with women. In fact, it is claimed by most authors that mention her that she brought her girlfriend at the time along with her and Poole on their honeymoon. As such, she is considered an out lesbian; the fact that she was out at this time in history is incredibly interesting and should be examined more thoroughly. However, because of her upper-class background and wealth during much of her life, she is not considered to have much to tell us about the life of a lesbian during this time period. Further complicating this is the fact that much of the mentions of her in history are connected to famous relationships she had during her lifetime, Greta Garbo being the most famous of

---

<sup>1</sup>Vickers, Hugo. *Loving Garbo: The Story of Greta Garbo, Cecil Beaton, and Mercedes De Acosta*. New York: Random House, 1994. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 39

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 159. I cite Vickers in multiple places and contexts in this paper; this is because Vickers had access to many papers and sources that I did not, and the majority of my citations of Vickers are his quotations and/or paraphrases from said sources.

these. To explore all that Mercedes de Acosta's life and experiences has to tell history, this paper will explore her experiences and how her life factors into the complex social forces at work in the United States at this time. As such, this paper will mainly focus on the United States; while de Acosta did live in France for a significant period of time and while she did travel to many other places, including India, she spent most of her life in the United States, steeped in the culture of the United States.

She was born in New York City in 1893; while her ancestry is generally considered Cuban, it is clear from her words in her autobiography, *Here Lies the Heart*, that she and her family considered themselves Spanish. She was the youngest of her family; she had close relationships with her family, but she was particularly close to her mother, her sister, Rita Lydig, and her older brother, whom she called Hennie. Her education was standard for a young Catholic woman at the time; she attended multiple convent schools, and did not go to university. She married Abram Poole in 1920, even though she was not attracted to him. She stated in *Here Lies the Heart* that she married him because of her mother's ideas about marriage and the place of women; even though de Acosta was a suffragette, she did not want to disappoint her mother<sup>4</sup>. She and Poole divorced in 1935, after many years of living apart.<sup>5</sup> Mercedes de Acosta had a thriving career as a poet, but decided to focus on stage production, as that was her passion. She is considered by many to be a commercial failure, as neither her plays nor her screenwriting were commercially successful. She was considered vivacious, witty, and clever; she made many friends in the theatrical and Hollywood worlds, including Cecil Beaton, Greta

---

<sup>4</sup> de Acosta, Mercedes. *Here Lies the Heart*. New York: Reynal, 1960. 108

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 262. While it was a mutual agreement to divorce, she did not want to be the plaintiff in the case; therefore, because it was Poole who primarily wanted the divorce in the first place, he was the one forced to go to Reno, as the phrase was back then.

Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and others. She wrote and published an autobiography entitled *Here Lies the Heart* in 1960; some of her former friends severed ties with her over it. She died in near-poverty in New York City in 1968; she had had health problems, including issues that forced her to undergo brain surgery, in the years preceding her death.

Mercedes de Acosta is a deeply fascinating figure who has had little scholarship done on her in the past; therefore, this leads to the question: how did Mercedes de Acosta's experience as a queer woman affect her career and relationships, and how might her experiences inform our understanding of lesbian life and experiences in the twentieth century?<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, how do the descriptions of de Acosta in later biographies situate her in the environment of the twentieth century, and why is she portrayed the way she is in historiographical work? Mercedes de Acosta's queerness immeasurably affected her career and relationships, familial, romantic, and otherwise; this is because of the way that lesbians and lesbianism were regarded in this period. These experiences due to the perception of lesbians by the heteronormative society she lived in can inform our understanding of lesbian life in the early half of the twentieth century more than most think; not only that, but it is clear that her autobiography, *Here Lies the Heart*, is a more important document in this regard than previously thought. Even though Mercedes de Acosta's life was different from that of most lesbians of the era, the way she was treated both in her time and after, in works about her and those she had romantic or platonic relationships with, is very illuminating.

---

<sup>6</sup> There are some notable works about her, such as Robert Schanke's *That Furious Lesbian: The Story of Mercedes de Acosta*, and Hugo Vickers' *Loving Garbo: The Story of Greta Garbo, Cecil Beaton, and Mercedes De Acosta*. However, there has been little work done on her life since, and not in the context of what she could tell us about her time period; rather, the majority of work done on her since has focused mainly on her relationships with her paramours.

The concept of the lesbian, both as a woman who loves other women and as an ominous figure lurking in the shadows, was relatively unknown before the turn of the century in the United States.<sup>7</sup> This is because of the different conceptions of women's sexuality before this time. However, once sexologists entered the scene with their ideas on sexuality, close same-sex relationships, such as so-called "romantic friendships" and "Boston marriages", became suspect. This also happened with the relationships of men, to an extent; however, while male homosexuality was recognized before this point, female homosexuality was not. Mercedes de Acosta was born in the middle of this period when ideas surrounding women and sexuality were changing. This changing of ideas surrounding women, their place in the world, and the idea of women being able to both love and sexually desire other women, shaped her life. This shaping of the life of Mercedes de Acosta is evidence that her life and experiences can tell scholarship more about this period than previously imagined, as others were also shaped by these same societal shifts. One instance of this is from Mercedes herself, looking back on her childhood—she cites an example of two nuns in a romantic relationship who taught at the convent school that she attended. de Acosta states that:

---

<sup>7</sup> Duggan, Lisa. 1993. "The trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America." *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture & Society* 18, no. 4: 791. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 19, 2016). The Alice Mitchell case is regarded by many scholars to be the turning point in discourse surrounding the existence of lesbians at this time; in 1893, Alice Mitchell killed her lover, Freda Ward, so that she would never leave her to marry a man. Because of the results of this trial, that Mitchell was sent to an asylum based off an insanity plea rather than being convicted (due to her "abnormal" love for Ward), this is the event that cemented a) the existence of lesbians in the American consciousness, and b) the association between lesbianism and mental illness. While this change of thinking from close female friendships being desirable and necessary to a sign of mental illness was slow in coming, by the end of the 20's this concept of the 'mentally ill lesbian' was cemented in American society.

I was very fond of Sister Isabel. She was a very gentle young nun, and since these letters [that Mercedes passed back and forth between her and Sister Clara] seemed to mean so much to her and she loved Sister Clara so much, as she often told me, I saw no reason why I shouldn't help her. Sometimes I even stayed in after class to "keep an eye" on the corridors while Sister Clara stole in to have a few private words with her... I was only unconsciously aware of the human element in the whole matter, and I felt the craving in Sister Isabel to give human love and have it returned. When these letter carryings and secret meetings had been going on for some time, a sad thing happened. Sister Clara received a notice that she was to be transferred to China at once. The notice said that the transfer would be for life. Apparently the Mother Superior had been aware of what was going on and had been instrumental in the transfer. Sister Clara had to leave the following day. She was allowed five minutes at the eleven-o'clock recess to say good-bye to Sister Isabel in her room. Confiding all this to me, Sister Isabel asked me to remain in the room —perhaps because she was afraid she might throw herself out of the window when Sister Clara was gone. Sister Clara came in rapidly and for a second they stood mutely before each other. Then suddenly Sister Clara folded Sister Isabel in her arms and they clung to each other. Not a word was exchanged between them and then Sister Clara pulled herself violently away and rushed from the room. A cry like the cry of death came from Isabel and she crumpled and fell to the floor. I rushed to her. The Mother Superior and two other nuns came in, and I was taken away weeping hysterically myself.<sup>8</sup>

While de Acosta does not state outright that these two women were in a relationship, she gives the reader enough evidence to extrapolate this conclusion from her wording and reactions to their separation.<sup>9</sup> Her repetition of the word “love” in this passage, as well as the description of their parting, with Isabel’s “cry like the cry of death” demonstrate the strength of feeling between the two nuns. The usage of de Acosta for passing notes and keeping an eye on the corridors when they met implies the need for some sort of secrecy in their meetings, and the reaction of the Mother Superior establishes that their relationship was not approved of. Furthermore, de Acosta’s speculation that Sister Isabel

---

<sup>8</sup> *Here Lies the Heart*, 36-37

<sup>9</sup> Collis, Rose. "Mercedes De Acosta: 'The Spanish Lothario'" In *Portraits to the Wall: Historic Lesbian Lives Unveiled*. London: Cassell, 1994. 29-48. Collis also realizes the importance of the incident with the nuns in the life of de Acosta; she states that “[de Acosta] made it perfectly clear that she knew what was going on and was in total sympathy with the nuns”, and that the later events that took place in the second convent that her mother sent her to was a direct result to the trauma she underwent at witnessing their parting (33-34).

would commit suicide because of her separation from Sister Clara further demonstrates that they were indeed in a relationship, even though de Acosta did not state outright that they were linked romantically. Yet another indication that this relationship was romantic comes from de Acosta's description of what happened afterwards – she was taken from this convent and sent to another one, the same one her sister attended, this time in New Jersey. de Acosta states that she ended up not eating, not speaking, and, as the nuns had no idea what to do with her, left her sitting on the steps for the majority of the school day.<sup>10</sup> This trauma she suffered at their parting is an indication that this event had a large effect on the young de Acosta; whereas beforehand the close relationship between the nuns might have been more accepted, the societal shifts of the perception of these relationships (as something potentially homosexual, or deviant) affected both these nuns, de Acosta, and many others.

Secrecy was a necessity of queer relationships between women throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century; this created tension between de Acosta's desire to not hide anything about herself or her desires with the needs of her lovers and necessities of the time she lived in. While the incident with the nuns happened around the turn of the century, the scrutiny of close female relationships, friendship or otherwise, intensified further with increasingly widespread theories on female homosexuality, which posited queer women as mentally ill and abnormal.<sup>11</sup> This necessity for secrecy in queer relationships during this period can be seen in de Acosta's relationships, where it is clear, especially in her relationship with Eva la Gallienne, that both parties disliked this necessity and desired to be more open about their relationship. Le Gallienne and de

---

<sup>10</sup> *Here Lies the Heart*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. 65-66.

Acosta wrote letters to one another daily; in some of these letters, le Gallienne detailed her despair over having to sneak around in secret, and her desire to be de Acosta's "bride".<sup>12</sup> Le Gallienne was an up-and-coming young actress when the pair met, and over the course of their five-year-long relationship she was still climbing the ranks in the theater. Mercedes de Acosta, by contrast, was an up-and-coming playwright, having decided that playwriting was her main career aspiration rather than poetry, and she was ostensibly in married bliss with Abram Poole. It was a combination of their career desires, the homophobic society they lived in, and the fear of "ensorious gossip" that forced the pair to meet "so clandestinely, like strangers".<sup>13</sup> Mercedes de Acosta was also bothered by this forced secrecy in their relationship, as can be seen with her poem to le Gallienne, "Good-bye on the Boat":

Early morning—  
 Rising.  
 A dead, hopeless feeling about my heart.  
 Going out—cold air on my face—  
 Crossing the ferry with others  
 And at the boat  
 Finding you in the crowd.  
 Hundreds of faces—  
 Pushing humanity—  
 Staggering porters  
 Burdened with heavy luggage  
 Groping up the gangway.  
 Voices everywhere—  
 An onrush of meaningless—empty words.  
 Confused orders—repeated directions.  
 You and I standing in it all  
 Helpless—hopeless—

---

<sup>12</sup> Schanke, 66. "Since Mercedes was married, their relationship always had to be hidden. When Eva stole back to New York during breaks on the tour or on weekends, they met secretly in Eva's apartment. Their separation and their need for secrecy frustrated Eva to the depths of her soul. She yearned to proclaim their love to the heavens. She dreamed constantly of marrying Mercedes, of being her bride. Eva was bothered that she and Mercedes were forced to meet so clandestinely like two strangers."

<sup>13</sup> Schanke, 66.



Trying to seem indifferent before the others,  
 And like the rest saying  
 Trivial—futile things.  
 A shrill whistle—  
 I calmly saying  
 “I think we had better go.”  
 Kissing you lightly—coldly—  
 And with the others leaving you.  
 Going off the pier  
 My throat closed with pain—  
 Eyes dim—staggering just a little.  
 Then standing in front of the ferry  
 Trying not to seem crushed—  
 With the confusion past  
 The hideous realization  
 That you have really gone  
 Comes over me—  
 The desperate regret  
 For all the trivial things I said,  
 And because I did not kiss you  
 The way I wanted.”<sup>14</sup>

This poem details de Acosta’s feelings as le Gallienne went off to Europe on a tour of her show at the time, *Liliom*. One can see her frustration with society’s standards in this poem—de Acosta’s regrets, that she was forced to say “trivial things” rather than what she wanted to say to le Gallienne, and that she was unable to “kiss [her] the way [she] wanted”, demonstrate this. There would have been no public outcry if a man and a woman kissed passionately before one went on a long journey. It would have been different, however, if it was two women doing this in public. Lilian Faderman states that in the 1930’s, when de Acosta wrote this poem, that the “otherness [of a woman who loved other women] was depicted sometimes as a sickness, sometimes as immorality, only very seldom as consonant with soundness and decency—and always as a rare ‘condition’.”<sup>15</sup> Due to the legacy of the sexologists equating female homosexuality with

---

<sup>14</sup> Schanke, 64-65

<sup>15</sup> Faderman, 101.

mental illness, it was depicted as simultaneously a “condition” and a moral failing of the woman in question. Public displays of affection, more than “kissing [one another] lightly—coldly” would have marked both de Acosta and le Gallienne as deviant in the eyes of society and as morally improper. Therefore, while it would have been possible for de Acosta to, say, kiss her husband passionately (though it is unlikely she would have wanted to) before leaving on a long journey, it was not possible for her to do the same to her lover. It is clear, then, that de Acosta was subject to the same social standards that other queer women were at the time: while de Acosta was wealthy, in a secure marriage, and had a more privileged background than most, she was still forced to adhere to the social standards of the time, which included conducting her lesbian affairs secretly.

The written word was important in relationships between women, whether they were in long-distance relationships such as de Acosta and le Gallienne were, or if they were geographically closer to one another; this was true in the nineteenth century when romantic friendship was widely accepted and continues on to this day.<sup>16</sup> Most writers come from the perspective that de Acosta was somehow different from other queer women, in particular when it comes to her relationships; while many cite her tactics of “seduction” and point out that many of the women she was in relationships with throughout her life were high-profile actresses, the way that de Acosta conducted these relationships with other women – and the way that she saw them – was likely very similar to that of other queer women at the time.<sup>17</sup> While her courtships were different, as each relationship is different, she had marked similarities as well as differences from the

---

<sup>16</sup> <sup>16</sup> Turner, Kay, and Sheri Tornatore. *Dear Sappho: A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996. This is a collection of love letters ranging from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1990’s; in examining these letters and the commonalities they share, one can tell that letter writing was really one of the only ways women were allowed to express their passion for one another.

<sup>17</sup> Vickers, 13.

“norm”. For example, the letters she exchanged with all of her romantic partners, regardless of geographical proximity. One example is her letter exchanges with Marlene Dietrich, who, despite their close geographical proximity at the time of their relationship, sent scores of letters and telegrams to one another; romantic letters between women in this era were generally fairly explicit in expressing their desires, as can be seen in this example from Dietrich to de Acosta, who claimed that “she would live with the hope that she could see Mercedes from time to time—to see her eyes, or her hands, which she now adored. She told her that the moment Mercedes tired of her, she would descend into her tomb without inconveniencing her with the shedding of a single tear.”<sup>18</sup> Even more explicitly, in the course of their relationship Eva le Gallienne once wrote that “the thought of Mercedes’ husband or anyone else lying in [Mercedes’] arms was unbearable”.<sup>19</sup> The expression of these sorts of sentiments were not uncommon among queer women of the time, though many of them would not be as baldly stated due to the fear of someone opening their mail and finding out that these passionate love letters were written by women for other women.<sup>20</sup> Mercedes de Acosta, therefore, like other queer women of the era, expressed her desire through the written word, and had the desire of her correspondents returned to her through the institution of letter writing. In this way, she conducted her courtships similarly to other queer women at the time.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 18. This letter is not directly quoted because I do not have access to these letters, and Vickers stated that he was not given permission by le Gallienne’s estate to quote them directly (17-18).

<sup>20</sup> Turner, Kay, and Sheri Tornatore. *Dear Sappho*. I am not placing a page number here because the entirety of this book, save for the introduction, is a collection of primary sources of love letters from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1990’s. All of these letters have key similarities to the letters between de Acosta and her lovers in the expression of their romantic and erotic sentiments. The reason why I state that the sentiments would not ordinarily be so boldly expressed is because of many common elements in these other letters—some women only initial their letters, in hopes that it would be taken as a letter from a man to his sweetheart, and some mention worry that they would be discovered.

Letter writing was not the only exchange de Acosta had with her lovers either, as she both wrote and received poetry from them. One particularly famous poem written to her was from Isadora Duncan, who wrote:

A slender body, hands soft and white  
For the service of my delight...

Two sprouting breasts  
Round and sweet  
Invite my hungry mouth to eat.  
From whence two nipples firm and pink  
Persuade my thirsty soul to drink  
And lower still a secret place  
Where I'd fain hide my loving face  
My kisses like a swarm of bees  
Would find their way  
Between thy knees  
And suck the honey of thy lips  
Embracing thy two slender hips".<sup>21</sup>

This is an explicitly erotic poem—it demonstrates both sexual desire and erotic knowledge of de Acosta, and it also serves as a reminder to de Acosta from Duncan that she had sexual desire for her and wished to act upon it. This is more explicit than most poetry at the time – de Acosta's published work, for example, only hinted at homosexuality with ambiguous pronouns (generally sticking to "I" and "you") and using the theme of twilight.<sup>22</sup> This poem, therefore, highlights an important aspect of the erotic expression between Duncan and de Acosta; by explicitly stating that she would "fain hide [her] loving face" in a lower, "secret place", and by mentioning de Acosta's breasts and hands, Duncan is explicit about expressing her desires for de Acosta. This is important mainly because the historiography of de Acosta focuses mainly on de Acosta's sexual

---

<sup>21</sup> Schanke, 13-14

<sup>22</sup> Faderman, 6. The word "twilight" was, as mentioned by Faderman, often used as a theme or euphemism for expressions of love between women.

relationships with other women and because they mostly portray her as the instigator of these erotic relationships. Mercedes de Acosta did not only desire, she was desired in turn by the women she was in relationships with.

Ram Gopal, a close friend of de Acosta, said this about her: that “when she met men who ran the theaters, they did not want to work with a strong woman who loved other women. Men found her too overpowering”.<sup>23</sup> Schanke continues by saying that de Acosta refused to hide her desire for other women.<sup>24</sup> His wording here is important: Schanke specifically uses the word *desire* here; de Acosta had both romantic and sexual inclinations toward other women, and it is these sexual inclinations, or desire, that has both made her such a pioneering figure in her “refus[al] to camouflage” herself and has led to her being dismissed by others. This refusal to hide took a toll on her relationships, professional or otherwise; returning to Gopal’s words, that de Acosta was strong, loved other women, and was considered “overpowering” by men in positions of authority, one can conclude that this openness strongly affected her career; because de Acosta refused to compromise on her self-expression and manifest outward signs of femininity, such as the way she dressed, the way she related to her husband, the relationships she conducted outside of her marriage, and the way she related to (mostly male) producers in both the theater and Hollywood, she had less opportunity to rise in the playwriting and screenwriting ranks.

Though de Acosta conducted her relationships in secret, as being outed would be and was for many women a career-ruining prospect, she refused to wear traditionally-feminine attire. Mercedes de Acosta’s clothing was universally remarked upon as

---

<sup>23</sup> Schanke, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 2.

unusual: according to Patricia White, “Mercedes de Acosta had a look; she was known for it. She may have pursued icons, but she also made herself iconic... Almost every description of de Acosta emphasizes the distinctiveness and consistency of her wardrobe; she dressed all in black or all in white, and she looked *Spanish*.” She continues on by stating that Mercedes was “At once typecast and unique,[and that] she called attention to ordinary butchness by going over the top, for instance by exaggerating the usually understated sartorial practice of having several versions of the same wardrobe item.”<sup>25</sup> According to White, this unusual attire – highwayman’s cloaks, pants, buckled shoes, and tricorn hats – gave de Acosta a “paradoxical visibility” through her fashion choices.<sup>26</sup> This unusual fashion was a statement, even in 1930’s Hollywood; de Acosta was even told by a friend that she would gain a “bad reputation” if she wore slacks out West.<sup>27</sup> This bad reputation was, undoubtedly, a lesbian one. By purposefully wearing pants in a time where wearing pants carried a connotation of being outside of the heterosexual norm, de Acosta was calling attention to her desires, refusing to hide behind concepts such as “respectability” and refusing to adhere to the socially-acceptable fashion norms. Her style, according to her, was soon copied; Garbo wore pants (causing headlines), as did Dietrich, and, as did the friend who told her she would get a “bad reputation”, Elsie Janis. Even so, de Acosta was still seen as obviously queer; newspapers reported her and Garbo as “gal-pal[s]” as early as 1933.<sup>28</sup> This led to friction within her interpersonal

---

<sup>25</sup> White, P. "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 15, no. 3 45 (2001): 227-65. doi:10.1215/02705346-15-3\_45-227. 230.

<sup>26</sup> White, 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Here Lies the Heart*, 229, 212.

<sup>28</sup> Swenson, Karen. *Greta Garbo: A Life Apart*. New York: Scribner, 1997. 259 – the term “Gal Pal”, as well as terms such as “best pal” for men, was used often as a euphemism in newspapers for homosexuality.

relationships, such as within her romance with Garbo; in one apocryphal account of an argument between Garbo and de Acosta, de Acosta accused Garbo of being afraid of being accused of having “Sapphic inclinations”, and “Garbo snapped back” that she was right.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, there was a tension in the way de Acosta carried out her relationships, heightened by the high-profile many of her lovers had—while de Acosta wished to be open about herself, she lived in a society where her relationships had to be carried out in secret, even more so than normal; because many of her lovers were famous actresses and dancers, any rumors of “Sapphic inclinations” could ruin their careers.

This tension between openness and career safety was common to many queer women at the time, and certainly was present for de Acosta; as Rose Collis states, “[de Acosta’s] uncompromising expression of her sexuality was almost certainly responsible for the obstacles she encountered in her career. It is true that the erratic treatment she received was dished out... to many writers, but her openness... made her particularly vulnerable to dismissal or, more insidiously, lack of employment on the flimsiest of grounds.”<sup>30</sup> This happened to de Acosta many times; it may in fact be a contributing factor to her lack of wealth at the end of her life. Because she was so open about her lack of sexual interest in men, her career suffered; according to Felica Londré, a woman playwright had to prove that her “essential femininity—her attractive appearance, her social position as a wife, her ability to run a household, her maternal devotion, and so forth—had not been impaired by her writing career”, while Londré specifically speaks to the theater in the early twentieth century, this remained true for Hollywood as well.<sup>31</sup> Mercedes de Acosta had no children; after 1935, she had no husband (and had to carry

---

<sup>29</sup> Schanke, 109.

<sup>30</sup> Collis, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Schanke, 2.

the stigma of having been divorced), and, while slacks did become popular wear for women in the early 1930's, de Acosta was still visibly and unapologetically interested in women. Therefore, due to her openness, de Acosta did not have the career safety that more closeted women had; not only that, but partially due to concern about their image in the public eye, former lovers such as Garbo disassociated themselves from de Acosta, especially after the publication of *Here Lies the Heart*.<sup>32</sup>

Mercedes de Acosta's refusal to hide herself (or anything about her life) continued to manifest itself in her autobiography, *Here Lies the Heart*. As a result of its publication in 1960, many of the women she formerly had relationships with, including Eva le Gallienne and Greta Garbo denounced her autobiography when it was released because of de Acosta's hinting at her own homosexuality, and because of how she mentioned them within the book as well. Though de Acosta never directly mentioned homosexuality in the final published version of her book, passages within it definitely implied it, and, as a result, implicated former lovers such as le Gallienne and Garbo as queer women as well. This is because of the reputation de Acosta had gathered by this time, and because of the wording of these passages, even if she never said the word "lesbian" or stated that she was more than friends with any of the women she mentioned. The most notorious passage is her description of six weeks in a cabin in the Sierra Nevada's that she spent with Greta Garbo: she asks –

---

<sup>32</sup> There were other reasons for this, including what Swenson calls "possessiveness"; however, from the sources, one must conclude that the separation was also partially due to Garbo's image becoming more and more associated with homosexuality because of her continued association with de Acosta (Schanke 107).



How to describe the next six enchanted weeks? Even recapturing them in memory makes me realize how lucky I am to have had them. Six perfect weeks out of a lifetime. This is indeed much. In all this time there was not a second of disharmony between Greta and me or in nature around us. Not once did it rain and we had brilliant sunshine every day. We saw a new moon and watched it grow to fullness, making the mountains and the water shine like silver and the snow on the far-off peaks glisten like polished crystal... Greta said, "We must be baptized at once." Throwing off her clothes she made a magnificent dive into the water and followed it with the long, powerful strokes of an expert swimmer... the days and hours flew past far too quickly. They did more than that. They evaporated. There was no sense of time at all.<sup>33</sup>

Garbo famously disliked people talking about her; she disliked *Here Lies the Heart* even more because of the implications of lesbianism that were rife within all of de Acosta's descriptions of her. While they were in a relationship previously, this relationship had most definitely ended by the time *Here Lies the Heart* was written and published. Not only this, but photographs that de Acosta had taken of her at Silver Lake also appeared in the book – one of these images was of Garbo topless.<sup>34</sup> Even though this image was from the back, so her breasts were not shown, the implications of the way that de Acosta describes Garbo along with these pictures that were chosen of her were suggestive. Eva le Gallienne was also furious with her. While she had already cut de Acosta out of her life decades before, she was reported to have called the entire book a pack of lies.<sup>35</sup> Neither had been in a relationship for her for years by the time *Here Lies the Heart* was published, so why were they so angry? It is possible that they were shocked and embarrassed at the feeling of having been outed by someone who was once an important part of their lives. More likely, though, their reactions were due to a combination of that feeling and the social climate of the time. When *Here Lies the Heart* was published,

---

<sup>33</sup> *Here Lies the Heart*, 224-225.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 28. There are two other photographs of Garbo; she is clearly posed in both of them, so it is likely that she knew that they were taken of her.

<sup>35</sup> Vickers, 23.

being suspected as a lesbian was still, as it was in previous decades, equivalent to social death.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it is clear through the reaction to *Here Lies the Heart* at the time that this book was published by others mentioned in it, a book that is generally discarded unless it is specifically in relation to Mercedes de Acosta's life, has more of an impact and can tell historians more than they generally assume about the time period it was published in through the reactions of others to it.

From the reactions of others to *Here Lies the Heart* as well as the tension between being "out" and the secrecy that was necessitated in de Acosta's relationships, it is unsurprising that homophobia was widespread in this period; for queer women, however, the confluence of misogyny and homophobia led to a widespread phenomenon – lesbophobia. While some of this homophobia, misogyny, and lesbophobia was loud and/or violent, a lot of it was more insidious, such as the homophobia inherent in many official and unofficial systems. Mercedes de Acosta, as mentioned before, was an out lesbian during this period. As such, she mentions instances of homophobia in both earlier drafts of her autobiography, *Here Lies the Heart*, and hints to them in the final published draft. One such instance of homophobia in a previous draft is cited by Vickers, who states that "Mercedes applied for an editorial job [for a propaganda magazine during WWII].... Before hiring Mercedes, however, the FBI questioned her at length. The interviewer:

---

<sup>36</sup> Faderman, 138.

Came up with a question about John Colton and dug up the time I had shared a house with him when I first went to Hollywood. He seemed disturbed that I had lived in a house with a man without being married to him. We discussed this matter at length. He then said, with rather an uneasy air, “it seems to me on looking through these pages that you have a great many men friends who are not on the level sexually.” I thought this a quaint and original way of describing homosexuality. I laughed. He continued, “This is not a laughing matter, and now that we are on the subject, how would you describe yourself, speaking, of course, purely sexually?”...Quite indifferently, I said, “Oh, I am ambidextrous and androgynous. A sort of combination of both.” He leaned across the table and shouted, “You are what?” I repeated what I had said. He turned to the secretary and asked, “Can you spell those words?” She said she could not and did not even know what they meant. “Spell them for her,” he commanded. “I’m afraid not,” I said. “I am not here to give the government spelling lessons.”<sup>37</sup>

These were standard questions in the hiring of women for government positions during this time period. As Faderman states, this was a widespread occurrence for women seeking government work, whether it was during WWII in the armed forces, or whether it was afterward when homosexuality was seen as something “un-American” in the 1950’s.<sup>38</sup> It did not matter that de Acosta was a member of a formerly-wealthy, influential family, nor that she was applying for a position in a government magazine rather than in the army. Because of the fear of lesbians circulating around American society, she was privy to these questions, particularly as her reputation likely preceded her.<sup>39</sup> The reason why she did not include this passage in the published version of her autobiography, was, again, likely due to the social climate of the time. Because queer women were still seen

---

<sup>37</sup> Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 142

<sup>38</sup> Faderman, 126, 153 – while the situation in World War Two was dire enough that one had to be blatantly queer to be given a discharge for it, the political climate in the 1950’s was one where gay men and lesbians were targeted by McCarthyism as easily blackmailed by and even as one and the same with subversive elements. In both of these decades there were questions asked about potential “lesbian experiences” that those applying to jobs may or may not have had. Not only that, but the climate of homophobia was so great during this period that, as one woman stated in an interview with Faderman, “to be accused to is to be guilty.”(142).

<sup>39</sup> Faderman discusses throughout *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* the homophobia and lesbophobia of this time period at length, particularly in the context of the 1920’s, when society at large discovered the concept of lesbianism, the 1940’s, in the context of lesbians in the military, and in the 1950’s, when the end of the war brought forth a sort of snapping back to the status quo re: women and their place in society.

as mentally ill according to psychologists and because this was still at the tail-end of the McCarthy years, where homosexuality was seen as inherently un-American, even the implication that she would have been questioned in relation to homosexuality (hers or that of her friends) might have implied too much about de Acosta, as well as every single woman who she wrote about in the book.

Generally, Mercedes de Acosta has not been mentioned in recent secondary works regarding homosexuality in the twentieth century; if she is, it is as a footnote or in the context of her relationships, mostly with Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. This is because of the aforementioned assumption that she does not have much to tell historians outside of the narrow category of either early Hollywood or in the context of her relationships. However, when examining this threadbare coverage, it is important to note that they all say one thing about de Acosta – that she was, in Schanke’s words, a “professional lesbian”, i.e. a seductress that would attempt to sleep with any woman she could.<sup>40</sup> This could be due to the fact that she was a polarizing figure – either one loved her, or considered her a “terrible bore.”<sup>41</sup> It could be due to the fact that she did not receive accolades for her art, for the most part; it could also be due to the cult of celebrity that has endured since the creation of “Hollywood” as an entity—people are interested in the relationships of stars, especially scandalous ones; it stands to reason that lesbian affairs, seen as doubly scandalous, would be of interest to historians. Another possibility could also be due to different tropes concerning queer women and their portrayal that, while less common today, still endure.

---

<sup>40</sup> Schanke, iv. Schanke was quoting the long-term life partner of the late Le Gallienne when he said this; this is the conclusion that he also came to when debating what it actually meant.

<sup>41</sup> Vickers, 159.

For example, the portrayal of de Acosta as the instigator in all of her relationships. While it is true that she did often initiate these relationships and contact with her lovers, the turns of phrase that these authors use stand out. Rose Collis refers to de Acosta as “the Spanish Lothario”, and states that she was one of history’s “Great Lovers”, even though she also mentions that de Acosta would likely rather have been known for her art than her sexual conquests; Hugo Vickers states that de Acosta gave “no thought to the cost in the cause of seduction”, and that she would “operate... with champagne, lilies, and caviar”, and many other authors state similar things to Collis and Vickers.<sup>4243</sup> This leads to a portrayal of de Acosta as being obsessed with seduction, and as a result, sex with other women, which is hardly a flattering one. While there may be some elements of truth to this portrayal in that she did often reach out to her lovers first (Dietrich was an exception to this rule), this picture of a sex-obsessed de Acosta is a contributing factor to the lack of exposure she gets as a historical figure—by focusing in on de Acosta’s lesbian relationships, authors who write about her dismiss her other accomplishments and interests. Some, like Collis and also like White, who states that while de Acosta’s work “languish[es]” in the archives, she still focuses on the de Acosta-Garbo relationship, mention this lack; however, others, particularly biographers, tend to place the focus on her relationships to the detriment of de Acosta’s other interests without mentioning this extra context.<sup>44</sup> Not only that, but by framing her as some sort of seductress, historiographical work about de Acosta pathologizes her, to an extent – by pairing this idea of a sexually aggressive woman (seeking out other women) with the fact that de Acosta did often have relationships with high-profile women, previous work done on de

---

<sup>42</sup> Collis, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Vickers, 13.

<sup>44</sup> White, 235.

Acosta does play into these stereotypes without addressing them. It is for this reason that de Acosta's contribution to queer history should be re-evaluated – not only does she have more to contribute to queer history than her past relationships with famous women, but even within these relationships she is regarded as more aggressive and outside of the norm for lesbian relationships at the time.

Mercedes de Acosta lived a long and interesting life, full of artists and eccentric personalities as well as famous people and celebrities. She saw herself as an artist; the world at large, however, did not agree with her artistic vision when it came to her plays and screenwriting. As a result of this and her lack of financial success, she is seen as ultimately unimportant in the larger social fabric of the time, even as she was an open lesbian in a society where both male and female homosexuality was increasingly being condemned. However, this is not the case; her poetry contains new insight of how lesbians thought and felt, her letters to her lovers are examples of the lesbian love letter genre, and the reaction to her autobiography demonstrates the views of lesbians at the time. Historiographical portrayals of her are that of a seductress, who specifically sought out famous women in order to sleep with them. It is telling that a famous quote of hers, that “[she] could get any woman from any man” has no textual evidence base.<sup>45</sup> In short, de Acosta was a woman of her times; she was a feminist, an artist, and a lesbian. Not only that, but despite the differences between her upbringing and that of lower-class and middle-class lesbians, she still has much to say about the experiences of queer women in this period. Therefore, it is clear from her body of work that being a queer woman irrevocably influenced her career and life; her autobiography, *Here Lies the Heart*, can

---

<sup>45</sup> Schanke, 1. Schanke quotes this as fact; however, I have found no other sources which corroborate this.

tell historians more than previously thought, and that Mercedes de Acosta is a more important and complex figure than most historians give her credit for.

## Bibliography:

**Primary Sources:**

de Acosta, Mercedes. *Here Lies the Heart*. New York: Reynal, 1960.

Duncan, Isadora. *My Life*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1928.

Turner, Kay, and Sheri Tornatore. *Dear Sappho: A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters*.  
London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

**Secondary Sources:**

Abrams, Brett. "Latitude in Mass-Produced Culture's Capital: New Women and Other  
Players in Hollywood, 1920-1941." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 25,  
no. 2 (2004): 65-95. doi:10.1353/fro.2004.0045.

Bean, Jennifer M., and Diane Negra. *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*. Durham: Duke  
University Press, 2002.

Chauncey, George. "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the  
Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance." *Sexuality and Sexual  
Behavior*. doi:10.1515/9783110976342.324.

Collis, Rose. "Mercedes De Acosta: 'The Spanish Lothario'" In *Portraits to the Wall:  
Historic Lesbian Lives Unveiled*. London: Cassell, 1994. 29-48.

Dever, Maryanne. "Greta Garbo's Foot, Or, Sex, Socks And Letters." *Australian Feminist  
Studies* 25, no. 64 (2010): 163-73. doi:10.1080/08164641003762461.

Doan, Laura L., and Jane Garrity. *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women, and National  
Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.



- Ehrenstein, David. *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood, 1928-1998*. New York: William Morrow and, 1998.
- Enstad, Nan. "Dressed for Adventure: Working Women and Silent Movie Serials in the 1910s." *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995): 67. doi:10.2307/3178317.
- Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Faderman, Lillian, and Stuart Timmons. *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.
- Franzen, Trisha. *Spinsters and Lesbians: Independent Womanhood in the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 1996..
- Grier, Barbara. "The Leading Lesbian of the American Stage: Eva Le Gallienne had Beauty, Talent, Vision, and Lovers." *Lambda Book Report* 3, no. 9 (03, 1993): 15. <http://ezproxy.ups.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/236966100?accountid=1627>.
- Horak, Laura. *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934*. New York, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
- Katz, Jonathan. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. New York: Dutton, 1995.
- Madsen, Axel. *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood's Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women*. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub. Group, 1995.
- McLellan, Diana. *The Girls: Sappho Goes to Hollywood*. New York: LA Weekly Books, 2000.
- Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality: Documents and Essays*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

- Potter, Sarah. "'Undesirable Relations': Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women's Reformatory during the Progressive Era." *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 394. doi:10.2307/20458970.
- Schanke, Robert A. *"That Furious Lesbian": The Story of Mercedes De Acosta*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.
- Sheehy, Helen. *Eva La Gallienne: A Biography*. New York City, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- Streitmatter, Rodger. *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of Fifteen Extraordinary Same-Sex Couples*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.
- Swenson, Karen. *Greta Garbo: A Life Apart*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- Vickers, Hugo. *Loving Garbo: The Story of Greta Garbo, Cecil Beaton, and Mercedes De Acosta*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- White, P. "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 15, no. 3 45 (2001): 227-65. doi:10.1215/02705346-15-3\_45-227.