

Performativity and Sapphic Identity in the 20th Century White American Poetry*

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Abstract

This article explores Sapphic identity in twentieth-century white American lesbian poetry by focusing on the performative role of poetry and its reflections in some selected poems. It examines the social effects on this identity by emphasizing how they are reflected in poetry. The article aims to demonstrate how Sappho's notion of identity evolved into social action in the twentieth century through poems by Judy Grahn and Rita Mae Brown based on social and political reflections of Sapphic identity and poems by Ellen Bass and Elsa Gidlow based on physical depictions and erotic reflections of Sapphic identity. In this process, Judith Butler's perception of the theory of performativity will also be helpful in order to enhance the discussion of Sapphic identity in poems of white lesbian poets. Lastly, this article aims to explain how identity transforms into social action through the performative role of poetry.

Keywords: American poetry, Sappho, identity, performativity, lesbian poetry

Yirminci Yüzyıl Beyaz Amerikan Şiirinde Edimsellik ve Sappho Kimliği

Öz

Bu makale, yirminci yüzyıl beyaz Amerikan lezbiyen şiirindeki Sappho kimliğini, şiirin edimsel rolü ve seçilen şiir örneklerinde ortaya konma biçimine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Bu kimlik üzerindeki sosyal etkileri keşfederek, bu etkilerin şiire nasıl yansıdığına değinilecektir. Makale, modern dönem beyaz lezbiyen şairlerin taşıdığı Sappho kimliği olgusunun yirminci yüzyılda sosyal eyleme dönüşümünü şiirin edimselliği üzerinden ortaya koyacaktır. Bunu incelemede Judy Grahn ve Rita Mae Brown tarafından yazılan şiirler, Sappho kimliğinin sosyal ve politik yansıması üzerinden ele alınacaktır. Sappho kimliğinin fiziksel tanımları ve erotik yansımaları kısmında ise Ellen Bass ve Elsa Gidlow tarafından yazılan bazı şiirler incelenecektir. Şiirler incelenirken, Judith Butler tarafından geliştirilen edimsellik teorisi beyaz lezbiyen kadın şairlerin şiirlerinin tartışmasını derinleştirmek için yardımcı olacaktır. Son olarak, bu makale, şiirin edimselliği üzerinden kimlik kavramının nasıl sosyal bir eyleme dönüştüğünü açıklamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Amerikan şiiri, Sappho, kimlik, edimsellik, lezbiyen şiiri

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender is defined by the World Health Organization as the aspects of both sexes which are shaped within the frame of social environment (2019, para. 1). In contrast, in another definition, “gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth” (2019, para. 3). As a broader definition, the latter supports Judith Butler’s ideas for she favors the performance of the chosen gender instead of the socially constructed one. While the socially constructed nature of gender provides an understanding of what Butler opposes, gender as an individual experience aligns with her ideas. Although appearance manifests the chosen gender in daily and social lives easily, one’s own perception of gender can be challenging to express. Therefore, language can be functional in facilitating gender expression, acting as a tool to perform identities. Especially for people who are excluded from the society due to heteronormative standards, performing identity is essential because they would be invisible otherwise. Because the act of performing requires a supporting act through words, one can choose verbal or written expression. While verbal expression comprises of the act of speaking, written expression can be regarded as more inclusive because it includes all forms of writing from literature to advertisements or even slogans. Among all forms of literature, poetry can be regarded as a field open to various ways of expression. Therefore, poetry becomes a means for white lesbian poets to reflect their political, social, and cultural positions. So, this article will examine the 20th century white American Sapphic poetry with the help of the theory of performativity.

The theory of performativity suggests that language creates reality through words. In this sense, the theory offers a different understanding of the traditional notion of language as a passive tool. Highlighting the activeness of language, performativity is basically defined as carrying out an action by uttering words. However, instead of simply referring to speaking, performativity emphasizes the performative function of words. That is to say, language becomes an active tool in the theory of performativity because, as the theory emphasizes, words help and facilitate the realization of an action by transforming into acts. The term is defined as “The name is derived, of course, from ‘perform,’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicated that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (Austin, 2018, pp. 6-7) by John Langshaw Austin, who created a milestone in language with his theory. For Austin, the theory of performativity introduces performing actions by uttering. Concerning the poems analyzed in this article, Judith Butler’s ideas on the theory of performativity are essential because she associates the theory with gender. Most importantly, Butler attributes two different meanings to the term gender. One is the performed gender, which also refers to the gender roles, and the other is performative gender, which refers to the rejection of heteronormative gender roles. Therefore, while the former refers to the performing of the rules of the already established heteronormative gender roles, the latter refers to the performing of one’s desired gender, which indicates that performances act as impressions in sequence to oppose, change, and question the already established gender roles (Big Think, 2011). In this sense, performing the desired gender creates an effect of change in society because the performances are among the ways of rejecting the

gender roles. For instance, as Butler states, in a society that carries out strictness in gender roles, the performances of drag queens which are performed by males in female clothes are the examples of performing of the desired gender, and such examples cause a break in the common mindset because these performances are the unity of “anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (Butler, 2006, p. 162) and “it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory function of heterosexual coherence” (Butler, 2006, p. 162). In *Gender Trouble* (2006) and her other works, Butler suggests that gender roles, which are culturally and socially constructed, should be deconstructed to achieve the desired gender identities, and it can be achieved by performing not what individuals are required to be but rather through their own identities. She also suggests that the naturalization of gender identities by heteronormative order can be broken by repeated performativity, which has the potential to change the norms. For performativity to be practical, it should not be a single act but a continuous, repeated act. It must be repeated with various performances instead of being limited, and it should always be open to change. For Butler, performativity is also a permanent concept, like a habit that repeats itself through various performances. She suggests that the established norms of the heteronormative reality can be changed, reproduced, and are questionable. Therefore, performativity can become the way to question and change the established norms of heteronormativity. As Gill Jagger summarizes;

the categories through which embodied subjects come into being are never fully determining. This allows for the possibility of resistance, for the rearticulation of the categories, and hence social and self-transformation. Moreover, as these categories are themselves linguistically constituted, rather than naturally given, the way of approaching change and transformation is through language and signification ... that constitute and constrain particular identities, bodies and selves. (Jagger, 2008, p. 7)

So, the theory of performativity favors actions through words while requiring repetition to reshape identities with the help of repeated acts. It mentions language's active role in shaping, creating, or deconstructing already established realities. Therefore, words can benefit from the concept of performativity as a dynamic tool in language to create identities, which are then maintained through repeated acts again with words. As a field of literature and therefore of performativity, poetry helps the repetition and creation of identities with the help of language. This feature of poetry harmonizes with Butler's understanding of the theory of performativity which highlights the forming of identities through repeated acts and language. Although Butler does not necessarily favor poetry, she highlights the importance of performable forms of expression, and poetry is performable. Besides, Sapphic poetry also corresponds with Butler's ideas because Sapphic poetry as a whole reflects on the desired genders of the poets who do not fit into the society due to heteronormative gender roles and social rules. Considering the link between words and performativity, poetry, as a form of literary expression, helps constitute and reshape identities, especially the marginalized ones, by transforming into a medium of performative words.

When the theory of performativity is associated with Sapphic poetry, it can be seen that lesbian identity is created and performed through poetry from ancient times of Sappho until modern times.

Therefore, Sapphic identity can be regarded as an example of performativity through poetry. In the 20th century, white lesbian poets challenged the norms and created an identity through poetry. Therefore, Judy Grahn's "A History of Lesbianism," and Rita Mae Brown's "Radical Man," and "Sappho's Reply" will be scrutinized by basing on social and political reflections of Sapphic identity, and "Taking Off the Front of the House," and "Sometimes, When She is Buried Deep" by Ellen Bass and "Invocation to Sappho," "Sappho Twined Roses," "Episode," "Philosophy," and "Love Sleep" by Elsa Gidlow will be scrutinized by basing on physical depictions and erotic reflections of Sapphic identity throughout this article. These poets exemplify how white lesbian poets challenge the taboos and cause change by rejecting and opposing the heteronormative gender roles with the help of performativity through words and poetry.

1. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REFLECTIONS OF SAPPHIC IDENTITY

Social and political reflections on the Sapphic identity of white American lesbian poets offer a profound commentary on the way lesbians, who belong to the marginalized groups in America, are otherized in society. Rather than solely focusing on physical depictions to express themselves, social and political reflections oppose and criticize the politics of the twentieth century, sometimes offering a potential to change. These reflections criticize the twentieth century political environment, a source of political and social unrest for lesbians. The unrest was caused by offensive events such as the Lavender Scare¹ and sometimes from policies such as the strategy called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" during the presidency of Bill Clinton in 1993, banning homosexual individuals from working in the army and encouraging segregation ("Repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,'" n.d.). The unrest caused by the policy strengthened the marginalization of homosexuals in the society. Assotto Saint's poem "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" criticizes the way these kinds of policies silence and ignore homosexual people from the society. In the poem, he depicts the exclusion of homosexual men as a result of policies by comparing homosexuality to a natural phenomenon while emphasizing the naturality of it.

To understand
The phenomenon
Of whales
Beaching themselves

Step inside a backroom bar
Discover
A colony of men

On their knees
Or bent over

¹ Lavender Scare is the name of government supported campaign against homosexuals in the United States in the mid-20th century to prevent homosexuals from being employed as public officers, suggesting that they pose risk and threat for the government. It is historically important because it contributed to the social discrimination of homosexuals.

In an open chorus

Of viral wails. (Saint, 1994, p. 7)

The poem shows the way they are subjected to silence in terms of sexuality and implies how they are silenced as a result of the policies that is referred to in the title of the poem. When regarded as a big picture for the twentieth century for homosexuals, the example above provides a view of political setting. However, although this example focuses on the oppression on men who are homosexuals, lesbian identity represents a different struggle because women experience a different social and political context because of gender roles. Therefore, apart from sexual orientation, the difference emphasizes the role of broader social expectations and oppressions against women in the shaping of lesbian identity. Therefore, social and political reflections of Sapphic identity in the poems create lesbian identity by using performativity through which the poets express themselves against the agenda. Their agenda is based on the twentieth century that was prevailed by men, and it was a significant part of the problem for lesbian identity to exist. Although Sappho's poems and other sources do not reflect rigid oppressions for homosexuality as in the twentieth century, creating a more embrative setting for lesbian identity, Sappho's works sharply portray gender discrimination. So, discrimination converges the experiences of Sappho and the twentieth century lesbian poets. While homosexuality seems to be more accepted in Sappho's times, Sappho could not reflect it openly due to women's inferiority in society. Besides, the twentieth century lesbian poets have difficulty in reflecting their identity because of the same inferiority, which is deepened with the marginalization of homosexuality as well, and this condition doubles the hardship for the twentieth century lesbian poets. Therefore, because poets have a shared experience both centuries, the subjects of the twentieth century lesbian poetry becomes important as they represent a version of Sappho's struggles. Sappho's poems, being written in a society that excluded women and lesbians, depict a search for a space for identity as well as feminine desire. Similarly, the twentieth century lesbian poetry reflects how the poets are subjected to invisibility in their poetry which helps create a space for their identity. Therefore, the struggle for actualizing identity and self-expression throughout centuries creates a strong link between Sappho and modern Sapphic poets, while reclaiming space for their identity in a society that tries to silence them. As an example, in her poem "Seizure," Sappho depicts men as superior, and she cannot even see the man as an opponent in ancient times, so the poem's setting is an example of the similarity of the environment of the ancient times and modern times.

To me he seems equal to gods,

the man who sits facing you

.....

when I look at you a moment

my voice is empty

and can say nothing as my tongue

.....

and feel my mind slip as I go

close to death. (Sappho, 2009, p. 43)

As Sappho is sad for her love towards a woman, she depicts men to the reader; “a species with powers inaccessible to her as a woman, and who therefore appears equal to a god. ... and she can in no way escape, except through words, from the solitude” (Sappho, 2009, p. xxxvii). Providing an insight on gender in ancient times, Sappho’s reflections in her poetry makes the reader realize the similarity of gender hierarchy in her times and modern period. As stated in the quotation above, let alone women’s inferior position, lesbianism is subjected to silence in ancient Greece. Therefore, when compared, Sappho had a chance to express herself in poetry, and modern lesbian poets have found a chance to perform their identities through poetry. Sappho writes, “Someone, I tell you, in another time / will remember us” (Sappho, 2009, p. 109), suggesting invisible identities would be able to speak louder in the upcoming centuries, which may be interpreted as a wish for a nonhierarchic society. Though the environments of both periods have a similar order in terms of gender and sexuality, the modern lesbian poets and their poetry have a chance to speak louder, which actualizes Sappho’s legacy. In this sense, Judy Grahn’s “A History of Lesbianism” and Rita Mae Brown’s “Radical Man” and “Sappho’s Reply” will be scrutinized in this part. Judy Grahn and Rita Mae Brown are among the most significant poets who strive for normalizing, actualizing, and cherishing lesbian identity, besides, because neither of the poets shy away from criticizing the political and social background that affects lesbian identity, their poems become a model to understand Sapphic identity and the struggles of lesbians.

To begin with, Judy Grahn was a poet, an activist, and a scholar. When she was eighteen, she joined the Air Force. However, as stated in the Poetry Foundation, she was dismissed for the reason of being openly gay. Her poetry focuses on feminism and lesbianism. As she defines herself, “A poet of the world is of use in the world. An activist poet stirs the world to action.” (Grahn, 2012, p. 117). Besides, “Poetry became a grassroots tool for joining women in common expression” (Grahn, 2012, p. 185). As it can be understood from the quotations above, she believes that being a poet does not only mean to write poems but also to do something with the use of words. Besides, being a poet who favors activism in the struggle for identity reinforces the action of the poet who attempts to express identity and gather the relevant identity’s member together. Her ideas on being a poet and creating action through words are her most significant aspects that make her poetry fit in the theory of performativity. The theory cherishes performing identities and acting through words; similarly, Grahn suggests that poets can trigger actions by poems. Besides, contributing to the performativity theory’s emphasis on transformation through performativity, Grahn speculates about Sappho’s ideas, “Sappho said that poetry is only air. But sometimes that air can be a wind causing a sea change, especially if that change is personal and interior at first” (Grahn, 2012, p. 206). This statement also contributes to the theory of performativity because of its emphasis on change. Therefore, she favors poetry that reflects identity. She primarily represents lesbian identity by referring to Sappho as well.

Judy Grahn’s poem “A History of Lesbianism” (1978) depicts lesbians in America by posing three questions: how lesbians came into, lived in, and left the world to provide a historical and

chronological map. First, she discusses how lesbians came into the world and how the presence of lesbian identity is prolonged.

How they came into the world,
the women-loving-women
came in three by three
and four by four
.....
until there were more
than you could count (Grahm, 1978, p. 54)

As seen in the first part of the poem, her reference to the beginning of lesbianism and past tense can be traced to Sappho. Grahm draws an imaginary trace from Sappho to contemporary poets to express how Sapphic identity and its reflections on poetry survived not only in this poem, but also in *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (1985). As quoted above, "A History of Lesbianism" begins with an emphasis on "How they came into the world" (Grahm, 1978, p. 54); thus, it can be considered as a reference to the past, and as she states,

Sappho wrote to us from an island. ... But to those of us holding Sappho in our mind's eye as *the* historic example both of Lesbianism and of Lesbian poetry, everything she represents lives on an island. That island is separate from, even though it is central to, all of that ancient, ritualized and mundane life of thriving, gorgeous Greece. (Grahm, 1985, pp. 5-6)

In this way, the poem's first part can be regarded as an overall statement that emphasizes the centuries that lesbianism has existed in the world. The poem continues by depicting the understanding of love for lesbianism; "they took care of each other / the best they knew how" (Grahm, 1978, p. 54).

The second part asks, "How they lived in the world" (Grahm, 1978, p. 54). After telling they lived "the way they liked / ... / They did whatever / they knew to be happy or free" (Grahm, 1978, p. 54), which is a metaphor for the richness of the world that Sappho has both created and expressed as follows:

She praised it often enough: love, beauty, grace, flowers, appropriate behavior to attract the gods, lovely clothing, intelligence, tenderness. Her poems are filled with the color purple, the color gold, the sun, flowers, especially the violet and the rose, and altars, deer, groves of trees, and the stories of the gods. Love, she said, is a tale-weaver. (Grahm, 1985, p. 7)

The setting shifts to a patriarchal society in the last part of the question, "How they went out of the world" (Grahm, 1978, p. 55).

the women-loving-women

went out one by one
 having withstood greater and lesser
 trials, and much hatred
 from other people, they went out
 one by one, each having tried
 in her own way to overthrow
 the rule of men over women,

 until each came in her own way
 to the end of her life
 and died. (Grahns, 1978, p. 55)

This part of the poem demonstrates the difficulty of lesbians to continue their existence in a heteronormative society in which “the women-loving-women” (Grahns, 1978, p. 55) cannot shape the norms. However, Grahns finishes the poem by criticizing the society prevailed by men; she tells that, although the concept of lesbianism is common, heteronormative social environment makes it bothersome (Grahns, 1978, p. 55). To conclude, this part of the poem clarifies the way lesbian identity disturbs the society traditionally ruled by heteronormativity and gender roles. With this poem, Grahns makes the reader realize the collective antagonism towards lesbianism while emphasizing and challenging the social structure that gives birth to the antagonism. Therefore, Grahns uses poetry to resist the power dynamics and order of the society that is grounded on patriarchy and gender roles.

In sum, the poem “A History of Lesbianism” (1978) written by Judy Grahns is a three-part poem divided by three questions. Proceeding from the roots of lesbian identity, Grahns addresses how Sappho depicts being a lesbian in her times. Then, she takes lesbian identity to the twentieth century. In the modern period, lesbian identity is expressed as the opposite of what is expressed by Sappho. Although the roots of lesbianism is based on acceptance, the heteronormative order caused it to be marginalized and discouraged. However, for Grahns, lesbian identity continues to be present despite challenges and causes anger in people who embrace heteronormativity. In short, Grahns’s poem questions the historical change of lesbian identity by asking three main questions, and it criticizes the modern period in which lesbian identity cannot find a space for itself to exist. When it comes to the connection of her poetry with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Grahns’s poetry can be regarded as repeated opposition and self-expression against the social norms. For Butler, identities can be created through repeated performances which end up as a potential change in society. In this sense, while “A History of Lesbianism” (1978) is based on how lesbian identity is constructed throughout history, it also emphasizes that identity is not only a subjective part of individuals, instead, identity has a social role created and reshaped by performances by opposing the social oppressions. So, Grahns uses poetry to create identity in a way that suits Butler’s theory of performativity.

Rita Mae Brown stands out as a significant lesbian poet who could oppose the heteronormative structure of the twentieth-century American society. Like Grahns, Brown finds space for lesbian

identity in her poems and through poetry in spite of social oppressions and obstacles. Brown was dismissed both from academia, in which she was successful, and from the National Organization for Women because she demanded more acknowledgment for lesbians and because of her sexual orientation. Her literary career began with feminist poetry collections *The Hand that Cradles the Rock* (1974) and *Songs to a Handsome Woman* (1973) after being accepted to New York University. She became known as the first homosexual woman who could normalize appearing before the public (Jackson, 2024, para. 1). In her poetry, she generally criticizes heteronormativity by pointing out the difficulty of being marginalized both as a woman and lesbian.

Besides being a critique on oppression, the collection's name is an allusion to the poem "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle is the Hand that Rules the World" (1898) written by William Ross Wallace in the nineteenth century, celebrating and glorifying motherhood as a mission in a Victorian setting. In contrast, Brown reverses the phrase in the title of Wallace's poem, and sarcastically challenges gender roles. Besides, the collection is "[d]edicated to women everywhere" (Brown, 1974c, p. 2). The poems "Radical Man" (1974a) and "Sappho's Reply" (1974b) are examples of her ideas on male domination and lesbian identity.

To begin with, "Radical Man" (1974a) is a poem that criticizes heteronormativity.

Witness his ego
How it flies
Up from earth
Seeing no other
In rarefied atmosphere
It congratulates itself
On its epoxied excellence,
The Eternal I,
A marvelous me of malevolence
Such is my brother
Such is our age. (Brown, 1974a, p. 16)

Introducing a criticism of male egocentricity, Brown mentions that men glorify themselves as if they have a steady superiority. Men being the sublime, the "marvelous," Brown places them in a state of "malevolence" (Brown, 1974a, p. 16). Brown depicts men who think of themselves as excellent, but she asserts that their egocentricity causes bad intentions, symbolized by "malevolence" (Brown, 1974a, p. 16). The poem ends with a picture of the prevalence of male dominance. So, the poem points out and criticizes the heteronormative social order in which oppression prevails.

Rita Mae Brown also makes Sappho speak in "Sappho's Reply" (1974b), as if she calls out from the past to encourage lesbians by making the persona of the poem Sappho who reacts to the modern conditions:

My voice rings down through thousands of years
To coil around your body and give you strength,
You who have wept in direct sunlight,

Who have hungered in invisible chains,
 Tremble to the cadence of my legacy:
 An army of lovers shall not fail. (Brown, 1974b, p. 77)

With Sappho's voice, Brown addresses the lesbians in modern times "through thousands of years" (Brown, 1974b, p. 77). The third and fourth lines, "You who have wept in direct sunlight, / Who have hungered in invisible chains," can be considered as a portrayal of the challenges she faces as a lesbian. Identifying the difficulty of lesbianism in modern times, the poem closes with two lines encouraging people from Sappho's voice; "Tremble to the cadence of my legacy: / An army of lovers shall not fail" (Brown, 1974b, p. 77). The last line may be a reference to Plato's *Symposium*, in which men give speeches on the concept of love while drinking. The first speech belongs to Phaedrus, which includes Brown's reference to Plato. As Phaedrus says, "And a state or army which was made up only of lovers and their loves would be invincible. For love will convert the veriest coward into an inspired hero" (Plato, 2008, para. 5). Besides, Phaedrus' definition was realized by the Thebans, who formed an army of homosexual men under the name of "the Sacred Band of Thebes" who appeared in the battle ground together, driving the Spartans off to free their city (Flynn, 2021, para. 4). With this reference, Brown offers a unity for lesbians instead of embracing isolation. As a successful act and example of performativity, Brown's last line in the poem was embraced by activists, and the lines were written on the cover of *The Lesbian Tide* by creating a series of effects in the 70s (Delgado, 2021, para. 1). Defying the isolation that a lesbian identity might bring, Brown expresses the persistence of lesbian identity by drawing a retrospective image of lesbianism, carrying the reader from ancient times to modern times. The retrospective image helps the reader comprehend the rooted nature of lesbianism. Besides, she suggests that the oppressed ones should come together and be united to prevail over the heteronormative power instead of staying invisible while prevailing lesbianism.

In conclusion, social and political reflections on Sapphic identity in the analyzed poems of both poets reveal the struggle of lesbian identity against the difficulties caused by marginalization. As analyzed in the poems, the poets suggest using performativity to criticize social and political challenges. In the atmosphere of destructive events, the poets oppose biases that continue the marginalization of lesbian identity, intending to silence them. Resembling Sappho's experiences, these mentioned poets echo their voices to glorify the existence of lesbian identity. Therefore, the poems of Judy Grahn and Rita Mae Brown highlight the struggle of white American lesbian poets, who opened space for their identity to exist through the performativity of poetry.

2. PHYSICAL DEPICTIONS AND EROTIC REFLECTIONS OF SAPPHIC IDENTITY

Physical depictions and erotic reflections of Sapphic identity in white American lesbian poetry challenge the traditional perception of the concept of love by giving detailed reflections of love between women in a detailed way, causing change in love stereotyped as a relation that only exists between a man and a woman. The detailed physical depictions and eroticism create a space and chance for Sapphic love to be regarded as "normal" in a time "When not referred to directly as homosexuals or sex perverts, such persons were often called 'moral weaklings,' 'sexual misfits,'

'moral risks,' 'misfits,' 'undesirables,' or persons with 'unusual morals.' But the most slippery and euphemistic term of all was 'security risk'" (Johnson, 2010, p. 18). Opposing the marginalization and isolation, white lesbian poets of the twentieth-century persisted in reflecting their love through poetry as Sappho included physical depictions and eroticism in her poems in a sensual way; "May you sleep / on your tender girlfriend's breasts" (Sappho, 2009, p. 99), and "round your tender neck you put many woven garlands made from flowers and ... with much flowery perfume, fit for a queen, you anointed yourself ... and on soft beds ... you would satisfy your longing (for?) tender ..." (Sappho, 1982, p. 117). In this sense, while the poems emphasize lesbian desire in a sensual way as shown above, this aspect also coincides with the definition of the term erotic which is mentioned by Audre Lorde by highlighting its aspect of action rather than the feelings (1981, p. 2). This statement can be attributed to the theory of performativity because of its emphasis on doing by uttering. In this sense, the poems that focus on physical depictions and eroticism coincide with the theory of performativity because they make the invisible visible in society by way of poetry. To give a detailed view of this, Ellen Bass's poems "Taking Off the Front of the House," "Sometimes, When She is Buried Deep," and "Sometimes I'm Frightened," and Elsa Gidlow's poems "Invocation to Sappho," "Sappho Twined Roses," "Episode," "Philosophy," and "Love Sleep" will be analyzed in this part.

Born in 1947, Ellen Bass earned master's degree in creative writing, and works in social events such as organizing poetry programs for people in prison and voluntarily helping people heal from sexual abuse during childhood because she has the same experience. In terms of lesbian identity, Ellen Bass identifies herself as a lesbian after marrying the wrong man, as she states in the interview with Meryl Natchez;

I felt like I was done with the gender roles and I was passionately interested in women's experiences. ... I'd been reading books by men my whole life and hearing about what men think my whole life and at that point I was just done. I was interested in women. I was just really *interested* in women. ... and I felt, 'Okay, I've spent the first thirty-five years of my life thinking about men, now I think I'm going to try thirty-five thinking about women.' (Natchez, 2020, para. 18)

Because she considers lesbianism as a milestone in her life, Bass uses physical depictions of women in her poetry to express lesbian identity. Besides, she erotically uses performativity to glorify feminine beauty and lesbian relationships. Her book *Indigo* (2020d) is a retrospective look at her lesbian identity, reflecting lesbianism in the twentieth century.

In the poem "Taking Off the Front of the House" in her book *Indigo*, Ellen Bass portrays a day with her wife Janet in real life as a daily scene in the kitchen (Bass, 2020c). Bass shifts the scene from private to public, which she symbolizes with the depiction of the front of their house, as suggested in the title. The front of the house fictionally shifts into a stage on which actors act in a housewife's daily missions. In the closing of the poem, the scene again shifts into the private space where Bass uses eroticism. As suggested by the poem, the lesbian couple cannot be themselves and cannot pursue their identity in public. Nevertheless, in private space, they pursue a lesbian relationship.

She closes the day, "... And as I enunciate the corporate evils, / suddenly the front of the house is sheared away" (Bass, 2020c, p. 16). As the oppressions represented by the front is cleared away, the scene continues as, "we smoke a little weed—something called / Thunder Fuck" (Bass, 2020c, p. 16) by implying sexual intercourse. Then, the actors close the scene by naming the fictional play "The Old Lesbians Go to Bed at the End of the Day" (Bass, 2020c, p. 17). The poem ends with an erotic narrative; "And as she turns toward me and I feel again / the marvelous architecture of her hips, the moon, / that expert in lighting, rises over the roofline, / flooding us in her flawless silvery wash" (Bass, 2020c, p. 17). The erotic ending of the poem is an example of how lesbian poets continue Sappho's legacy. As Bass uses the symbols of moon and silver to depict the sublimity of her feelings, Sappho uses the symbols of nature to express her feelings as quoted in the introduction of this part. Besides, the same tone continues as Sappho describe her desire, "Straightway, a delicate fire runs in / my limbs; my eyes / are blinded and my ears / thunder" (Williams, 1995, p. 251). As Bass calls the sexual intercourse "thunder," Sappho also chooses the same word to express her deep feelings towards a woman. In sum, Ellen Bass opposes the heteronormative perspective even in the fictional play's name. So, the poem performs eroticism to reflect their identity and opposes the traditional understanding of love.

As a second example, the poem "Sometimes, When She is Buried Deep" traces lesbianism by championing lesbian desire and eroticism by touching upon the issue of identity as well (Bass, 2020a). It begins with the narrator's transformation, and the narrator expresses her achievement of liberation:

between my thighs, rooted there
as a tree is rooted, digging into
my earth-heart, dirt-heart, heart riddled
with need and decay, breaking
down, breaking the world so
it can bud again, I become
the girl I was long ago, just out
of the gate, new to the track. (Bass, 2020a, p. 34)

The word "bud" symbolizes the rebirth from a rooted place, which can be considered as a rebirth or creating identity by getting out of the social norms in a society because social norms are the common ground accepted by majority. The narrator is reborn, and she is freed, eventually finding comfort with the woman she loves:

How surprised I am to find myself
here again, at this cusp of crumbling,
this last dissolve, surrounded
by such succulent skin, and oh,
how she opens me, how she lifts me still. (Bass, 2020a, p. 34)

Thus, Ellen Bass's poem glorifies lesbian relationships through physical performances and challenges the traditional understanding of love by reflecting eroticism as a powerful tool. The poem does not only portray romance, but it also portrays love between two women as a deep connection that exceeds traditional perceptions. With the help of the pure desire, the narrator reaches liberation by suggesting that love transcends the conventional definitions. Therefore, Bass's poetry celebrates feminine desire and lesbianism through physical depictions. Like Sappho, who highlights desire and love through poetry while going beyond the traditional understanding of love, Bass exceeds traditional limits of love by portraying love between women. In this sense, Sappho can be regarded as the leading figure in the narration of profound desire through poetry for modern lesbian poets such as Bass. With this perspective, while reshaping the concept of love, Bass celebrates eroticism which creates a space for lesbian identity as well.

In "Sometimes I'm Frightened," Bass explicitly depicts lesbian desire as follows "I can kiss her. I just can't keep on / kissing and kissing her. Even though / that's what I want. To fall / asleep with her lip between my teeth" (Bass, 2020b, p. 12). So, Bass uses poetry's function of performativity to celebrate lesbian identity by repeating the explicit demonstrations of lesbian love. In short, as stated in Smith College, Ellen Bass's poetry is defined to be broad by embracing both gender issues and sarcasm, and poetry is a ground for her to come together with others because it promotes empathy ("Ellen Bass," n.d.).

Last but not least, Elsa Gidlow, who is another significant lesbian poet, is known as the "poet-warrior" who "was unabashedly visible as an independent woman, a lesbian, a writer, and a bohemian-anarchist at a time when such visibility was both unusual and potentially dangerous" (Lev, 2005, p. 1). She is best known for publishing the first poetry collection about lesbian love in North America in 1923. As stated by Arlene Istar Lev (2005), Gidlow lived as a lesbian, and besides being excluded as a lesbian, Gidlow was later accused of being a communist. However, she did not favor communism and she expressed herself as pleased with her identity as a lesbian because she sorted her priorities respectively as being a human, then being a female, then being a homosexual (Lev, 2005, p. 2). Besides her poetry, her book *Ask No Man Pardon: The Philosophical Significance of Being Lesbian*, written in 1975, is an open manifestation of her lesbian identity.

Her poem "Invocation to Sappho" is a performance of Sapphic identity because it demonstrates how Sapphic identity is carried up to modern times with Sappho's poetry (Gidlow, 1982). In the poem, Gidlow declares devotion to lesbian identity by glorifying Sappho; "Sappho / Sister-Mother / free- / souled, fire-hearted" (Gidlow, 1982, p. 1). Then, she shows the way Sapphic identity is maintained through poetry.

let me declare
devotion.
Not light years love years
on how many love years
across fields of the dead
does your fragrance
travel to me? (Gidlow, 1982, p. 1)

Then, the poem closes by emphasizing the persistence of lesbian identity; “Do we not touch / across the censorious years?” (Gidlow, 1982, p. 2). Similarly, her poem “Sappho Twined Roses” depicts the way Sappho creates lesbian identity in her poems, which are symbolized by songs. “Attar for the ages: love only / Made her song flame” (Gidlow, 1982, p. 28). Then, the poem compares Sappho to a red rose, symbolizing the persistence of lesbian identity, mentioning the firmness of nature:

Red, red were the blown
Roses then, red as now.
.....
Sappho, burning
As a red rose in Lesbos, breathed
Fragrance undying. (Gidlow, 1982, p. 28)

In her book on lesbian love, *On a Grey Thread* (1923d), Gidlow continues to glorify women, and she reflects lesbian identity by depicting physical love. For example, in “Episode,” she mentions an intimate experience with a woman; “I have brought her, laughing / To my quietly sinister garden” (Gidlow, 1923a, p. 43). She uses nature while comparing her desire to a garden, just like she did while praising Sappho, and she feels free in her garden. Again, she portrays physical intimacy through symbols of nature:

I break wild roses, scatter them over her.
The thorns between us sting like love's pain.
Her flesh, bitter and salt to my tongue,
I taste with endless kisses and taste again.
At dawn I leave her
Asleep in my wakening garden.
(For what was done there I ask no man's pardon.) (Gidlow, 1923a, p. 43)

As stated in her poems that give voice to Sappho, her poems can be considered as songs through which lesbian identity and desires are carried in this sense. Likewise, in her poem “Philosophy,” she continues to highlight poetry’s help in making lesbian desires permanent:

O, love me very sweet
And kiss me very long
And let us use our breath
For song.
Nothing else endures Overlong. (Gidlow, 1923c, p. 53)

The reference to songs is repeated in her poems to imply poetry. Lesbian love is explicitly portrayed and performed in the poem mentioned above at first; then, it is perpetuated through performativity.

Gidlow also emphasizes and glorifies the feminine body and her desire. For example, in “Love Sleep,” Gidlow traces the body of her lover:

Watch my Love in sleep:
 Is she not beautiful
 As a young flower at night
 Weary and glad with dew?
 Pale curved body
 That I have kissed too much,
 Warm with slumber's flush;
 Breasts like mounded snow,
 Too small for children's mouths;
 Lips a red spring bud
 My love will bring to bloom. (Gidlow, 1923b, p. 55)

While observing her lover's body, Gidlow reflects lesbian desire in the poem. The poet's admiration provides a sensual, intimate, and physical perspective for lesbianism. By comparing her lover's body with nature, Gidlow also shows the naturalness of lesbian desire as a form of love. Portraying her lover's beauty as a beauty in nature, the poet expresses and reflects both lesbian identity and eroticism. The imagery of eroticism in the poem cherishes the erotic aspect of love between women. In this sense, the poem provides a broader understanding of lesbian identity by opposing the common view on love. As the examples demonstrate, Elsa Gidlow uses poetry to reflect Sapphic identity and make it a natural part of daily life by opposing traditional understanding. The symbols from nature used in her poems support her understanding that lesbianism is also natural. In *Ask No Man Pardon: The Philosophical Significance of Being Lesbian*, Gidlow defines the term lesbian as a person who naturally has distinct intimate feelings than the others, and the soul of this person is shaped by nature, so that the characteristic can neither be broken nor rejected (Gidlow, 1975, p. 5). Besides, she compares nature with lesbianism to highlight how she perceives nature as precious:

Universal Mother has birthed the beings called Lesbians because she needs some women who are more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies. Understand that Nature has always needed us and so through all time has produced necessary numbers of us. We know that in some ages we were priestesses. (Gidlow, 1975, p. 9)

Gidlow suggests that lesbians were sacred sometime in history, just like the poem "A History of Lesbianism," written by Grahn, based on joy and acceptance embraced by lesbians. As Grahn celebrates the time of Sappho with vivid images from joyous colors and nature by suggesting love as a powerful notion, Gidlow emphasizes their sacredness in order to suggest the naturalness of lesbianism. As both Gidlow and Grahn suggest, lesbianism is natural, and love and desire between women are also natural because it is experienced and present throughout the history. The shared perspective strengthens the idea that love between women is a timeless and distinctive experience with its profound eroticism.

To sum up, Elsa Gidlow's poetry is an example of performativity that is repeated with nature symbols to express lesbian identity. Besides, poetry for Gidlow, is a tool to maintain Sapphic heritage

in her identity. In an atmosphere where lesbianism is regarded as a possible threat for the society, although it has nothing to do with politics, Elsa Gidlow comes to the fore by explicitly pursuing lesbian identity through poetry's function of performativity.

In conclusion, physical depictions and eroticism in the poems are a way to challenge and oppose the traditional understanding of love and desire in a heteronormative society. Poets create a space for love between women through the performativity of poetry by defying oppression. With the help of the theory of performativity, the poems reflect lesbian identity and shape it erotically. Therefore, the works of Ellen Bass and Elsa Gidlow highlight the performative role of poetry in challenging the already-established rules of heteronormativity while promoting alternative love forms in a heteronormative society.

CONCLUSION

This article examines the construction of Sapphic identity in the 20th century white American lesbian poetry by highlighting the performative function of poetry. The theory of performativity helps analyze the poems because it emphasizes acting through words while promoting change at both social and political levels. So, the theory of performativity emphasizes language's active role in deconstructing, creating, and challenging identities to create a unique identity of one's own.

White American lesbian poets express Sapphic identity through poetry, encompassing social and political reflections, physical depictions, and erotic expressions. As the social and political happenings caused oppression and marginalization of lesbians, the poems of white lesbian poets oppose the conflict caused by heteronormative order by following Sappho, who is also a critique of the male order in Ancient Greek. Judy Grahn uses poetry to emphasize the difficulties of being a lesbian on a social level. In "A History of Lesbianism," she offers a three-layered, historical trace of lesbian identity to show the prolonged existence of lesbians, making the reader question the social and political norms in various periods. Likewise, Rita Mae Brown criticizes the difficulties of being a lesbian in the same way. In "Radical Man," she criticizes male dominance in the twentieth century, and in "Sappho's Reply," she makes Sappho speak as if calling out from the past to encourage lesbians in modern times. So, social and political reflections of sapphic identity in white American lesbian poetry reveal the struggle and hardships of lesbian identity in the face of social and political exclusion, creating a space for lesbian identity through the performativity of poetry.

Physical depictions and erotic reflections of Sapphic identity in the poems of white American lesbian poets offer a nontraditional perspective of lesbian love that challenges the traditional concept of love. These reflections also offer an indirect criticism of heteronormativity because they reveal the invisible in society. Ellen Bass and Elsa Gidlow offer exceptional performances of lesbianism in their poems by normalizing what is otherized, eventually creating a space for lesbian love to exist through poetry. Ellen Bass reflects lesbianism in daily life by imagining that lesbians are not marginalized and are living their desired lives. Elsa Gidlow also explicitly speaks of love between women. So, physical depictions and eroticism in the analyzed poems challenge the traditional notion of love in the heteronormative understanding. Performativity helps the poets draw the notion of lesbian love

with eroticism, challenging the social rules, while offering acceptance and comprehension of ways of love.

In conclusion, both political and physical reflections of lesbianism in white American lesbian poets' poetry reveal the white lesbians' struggle on both political and social levels. Besides, the poets help emphasize the power of poetry to transform identity into social action through performativity. As the theory emphasizes repetition to cause change, the poems of white lesbian poets analyzed in this article actualize this feature of performativity, and their poetry provides a space for lesbian identity to exist, confront, and transform the political and social conditions of the twentieth century that cause oppression. As Judith Butler emphasizes, performativity, which consists of repeated performances, can lead to social change by challenging the already established norms. Because according to Butler, the term gender is questionable because it is not a fixed notion, instead, it is the identity created by repeated actions. The poems analyzed in this article are examples for Butler's perception of the theory of performativity because, by rejecting what is stereotyped, and the already established aspects attributed to identity, gender, and love, the poems help narrators create identity that goes beyond and change the fixed social expectations and norms. Besides, just like Butler highlights the importance of creating space for social and cultural transformation, the poets analyzed in this article actualize transformation in terms of both social-political stance, and the notion of love stereotyped within the frame of gender roles. Therefore, while the poems analyzed in the first part contribute to change by questioning and opposing the social and political oppressions, the poems analyzed in the latter part cause change and transformation of love by expanding it out of gender roles.

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