
Forum looks back at a lesbian love triangle

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Anya Jabour, Ph.D. visited University of Chicago's Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality (CSGS) to present "A Lesbian Love Triangle at the University of Chicago: Sophonisba Breckinridge, Marion Talbot, and Edith Abbott"

The Jan. 14 program was part of CSGS's series *Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles: A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago*. The *Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles* project launched in 2011 and documents LGBTQ life at the University of Chicago from the early twentieth century through the present day.

"What was really exciting about coming to Chicago is that I would actually be talking to people for whom this is a local topic," said Jabour, professor of history and co-director of the program in women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Montana. "I was really excited to come somewhere where people are going to have a build-in interest in the thing that I'm currently really charged up about."

This lecture examined the complex personal and professional relationships between Marion Talbot, dean of women, Sophonisba Breckinridge, assistant dean of women and Edith Abbott, dean of the School of Social Service Administration. These were three prominent women during the formative decades of the University of Chicago.

Breckinridge had long-term intimate relationships with both Talbot and Abbott. Talbot and Abbott competed for Breckinridge's affections. Despite the tension created by this situation, from 1908 to 1948, all three women worked together to promote women's higher education, professional status, and political power.

"I would say the take home message is these relationships were important not only because they were personally important to the women, but because they helped them to succeed professionally and politically," said Jabour. They also helped them to help other women professionally and politically, so that the relationships were at the time personally fulfilling, professionally useful and politically they actually advanced, not just those women's but all women's status. So, regardless of their interpersonal differences and difficulties, which certainly existed, they ultimately ended up being an incredibly effective team for advancing women's status."

The lecture relied on extensive personal correspondence Jabour collected and research to explore both the complicated emotions and the achievements of three female pioneers at the University of Chicago.

"I'm really interested in what would it be like to grow up in an era in which relationships like this were viewed as non-sexual and wonderful and then by the end of your life they're viewed as sexual and deviant," Jabour said. "But they're the same relationships, literally. I think that's a puzzler."

Jabour's main interest is studying relationships. She has authored "Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal," "Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South" and "Topsy-Turvy: How the Civil War Turned the World Upside Down for Southern Children." She has also published numerous articles and essays, including "Relationship and Leadership: Sophonisba Breckinridge and Women in Social Work." Currently, she is working on a biography of Breckinridge (1866-1948)

"Relationships are interesting," said Jabour, who explores the whole gamut of relationships. "It's just like having a conversation with a friend about your relationships. It's fun having a virtual conversation with a dead person about their relationships by reading their letters. I think it's so interesting how our understanding of women's relationships with one another have changed so much and what that sort of means for how do we even talk about these things, how do we understand these things, how do we make sense of something that took place in the time that is not our time."

Having done a large amount of work on southern girls and southern adolescents, she found there were some incredibly rich collections of letters from schoolteachers. Seeing an opportunity, she turned her original subject matter

on its head, and started looking at educators instead of the educated.

Within her research of Breckinridge, Jabour learned along with her short time teaching in the south, Breckinridge held multiple degrees and yet she could not get a job until Talbot completely created the Department of Household Administration and gave her a job. While, doing background research on her, Jabour said she found barely anything had been written about Brekinridge, but she kept getting more intrigued the more she read and eventually found sources everywhere.

"Like most people, I tend to sort of look for inspirational foremothers, if you will" Jabour said. "So because I'm a lesbian, discovering someone I can really identify with, in this case, not only because she had an intimate relationship with another woman, but because she was a professor and she taught women's studies and I do those things. So I mean I definitely have a certain level of identification with Breckenridge that say I didn't necessarily have with some of the angst-ridden teenage girls that I've written about in the past. Although, I also identified with them on some level; just in a different way."

Jabour also led the Jan. 15 workshop "From Romantic Friendships to Sexual Deviance: Analyzing Women's Same-Sex Relationships in a Transitional Era."

"I think one of the things I really wanted to share was that these relationships were really important not only to the women themselves in terms of their emotional inner lives, but that they were important in terms of human rights. So that there's a really profound connection, in this instance, between relationships between women and social progress," Jabour said.

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