USE OF THESES

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‘She Gave Me That Look’:
a history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra
1965-1984

Submitted by
Judith Ion

A thesis submitted for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University

January 2003
She gave me that look,
but she wasn’t quite sure.
She sort of gave me that look of
‘Well, you might be but I’m not sure
so I’m not going to give you the full look’.

Interview with Emma, Canberra, 8 April 1994
For my parents
Leslie and Mary Ion
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Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Judith Ion

January 2003
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Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to officially dedicate ‘She Gave Me That Look’ to my parents. Thank you for everything.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACS</td>
<td>Abortion Counselling Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALGA</td>
<td>Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALM</td>
<td>Australasian Lesbian Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANZCP</td>
<td>Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>Australian National University</td>
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<tr>
<td>APA</td>
<td>American Psychiatric Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWEC</td>
<td>Australian Women’s Education Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPWC</td>
<td>Business and Professional Women’s Club</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAMP</td>
<td>Campaign Against Moral Persecution</td>
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<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>Consciousness Raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRCC</td>
<td>Canberra Rape Crisis Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWA</td>
<td>Camp Women’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWA</td>
<td>Country Women’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOB</td>
<td>Daughters of Bilitis (US)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVCS</td>
<td>Domestic Violence Crisis Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FANG</td>
<td>Feminists Anti-Nuclear Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTYC</td>
<td>First Ten Years Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLRS</td>
<td>Homosexual Law Reform Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HWAG</td>
<td>Hobart Women’s Action Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWD</td>
<td>International Women’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWY</td>
<td>International Women’s Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAG</td>
<td>Lesbian Action Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLA</td>
<td>National Library of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIR</td>
<td>Society for Individual Rights (US)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US(A)</td>
<td>United States (of America)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAAC</td>
<td>Women’s Abortion Action Campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WANE</td>
<td>Women Against Nuclear Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEL</td>
<td>Women’s Electoral Lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIS</td>
<td>Women’s Information Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WL</td>
<td>Women’s Liberation</td>
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<tr>
<td>WLM</td>
<td>Women’s Liberation Movement</td>
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<td>WOC</td>
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ABSTRACT

In Australia, the advent of gay and women's liberation in the 1970s provided the right milieu for lesbian feminist organising and community to emerge. Canberra’s lesbian feminist community took longer to develop than many of its larger urban counterparts, not fully emerging until the late 1970s. “‘She Gave Me That Look’: a history of lesbian (feminism) in Canberra, 1965-84” traces the origins of that community and explores what it was like to come out as a lesbian during that period. This history draws on documentary sources and a series of interviews I conducted in 1994 with eight women about their lesbian experiences between 1965 and 1984. These women were not involved in the formative years of either women's liberation or gay liberation, coming to feminism well after the emergence of both movements. Their journeys towards, and experiences of, lesbian feminist community in Canberra offer a different perspective to our understanding of this unique period in the history of twentieth-century Australia. ‘She Gave Me That Look’ builds on existing gay, lesbian and feminist histories; explores the different methodological approaches employed in the production of such histories; and focuses in particular on the implications involved in including oral testimony in the writing of lesbian history in Australia.
INTRODUCTION

"‘She Gave Me That Look’: a history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra’ is a localised history of women’s liberation, lesbian community and same sex desire in Canberra, 1965-84. I began work on this thesis in 1992, intending to write a history of lesbian life in Australia covering the period 1950 to 1980. In the process of researching this area, I came to realise just how much of Australia’s lesbian past has been neglected. I ultimately decided that the extent of research required to do justice to my original topic was beyond the scope of this project and reconsidered my options. The revised project, ‘She Gave Me That Look’, retains its lesbian focus but presents a local rather than national perspective. It has the following interconnected objectives: to create a local history based on the ‘coming out’ experiences of eight lesbians in Canberra in and around the 1970s; to recreate the unique social and political environment these lesbians came out into; and to trace how that environment came to exist in Canberra. Beyond the inclusion of personal narratives themselves, in ‘She Gave Me That Look’ the women’s experiences are contextualised more broadly in the local, Australian and international women’s and gay movements. Further to the history itself, this thesis explores the complex array of issues involved in including oral testimony in lesbian history and discusses some of the issues involved in writing lesbian history in and about Australia.

At its very base, this history evolved out of the narratives of eight women who came to identify as lesbians between 1965 and 1984 and whom I interviewed in 1994 about their experiences. Throughout the thesis, as a way of acknowledging their agency in interpreting their own life experiences, I have chosen to refer to the women I interviewed as ‘narrators’ and to their stories as ‘narratives’. Born between 1952 and 1961, at the time of the interviews the eight women were aged between 33 and 42. They came from a mixture of middle and working class backgrounds, were able-bodied and white and between them had a range of professional qualifications, work experiences, marital pasts and parenting commitments. I hesitate to describe the

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1 ‘Coming out’ refers to the process of naming oneself as homosexual, gay, lesbian or queer. This complex process is discussed in more detail in Chapters Five and Six.

women I interviewed as ‘ordinary’ and do so only with the proviso that in this context I am using the word ‘ordinary’ to describe the relatively quiet and unobtrusive nature of their lives. Between 1965 and 1984, these women were not known beyond the circles they moved in: they were known to those they lived with, went to school with, worked with, and socialised with. For a time their networks expanded to include the lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra but their involvement never resulted in wide public acclaim. Their names were not at the forefront of the women’s movement and even at their most politically active, they were not well known beyond their immediate community.

The eight women’s involvement with Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community was not, however, short-lived. The community altered their lives and their experiences while at the same time their continuing involvement helped shaped it. In 1994, the eight women were still part of that community although several indicated that they thought it was growing increasingly fragmented. In 2003, it is debatable as to whether Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community still exists. Many of the women who were involved in the community during the 1980s and 1990s still live in Canberra and although many remain friends and are still activists in one way or another, the sense of cohesion and community that once existed has dissipated. Evidence of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) past now exists only in an assortment of scattered documents and ephemera and in the minds of those who were once part of it. In 1994, when I conducted the interviews and became increasingly intrigued by how little we knew about our past, it seemed quite important to find an ethical way to record that past and the experiences of those who lived it. Today, in light of the fact that communities, memories and documents turn to sepia in time, that need seems even more urgent.

In this history, the eight women’s narratives can be seen to represent the similar experiences of many other women who lived and loved as lesbians in Canberra in the 1970s and 1980s. These narratives reveal much about the process of coming out during a particular period in twentieth-century Australia. Each narrator’s story is sometimes sad, sometimes funny, and sometimes political. As individual narratives they are useful to the historian as thoughtful, intelligent, and moving testimonies; taken collectively they hold even more potential as source material. For the purposes of this history, I was able to draw out the parallel themes in the women’s experiences and from them was able to determine the context best suited to situating the narratives in history. If I wanted to bring to life the social and political environment most germane to the individual experiences of the eight narrators, I knew I needed to find a way to address a series of questions: How and why had the lesbian (feminist) community evolved? What had made it possible for such a community to exist? How did it contrast to the lesbian communities that had preceded it in Canberra – if indeed any
had? Was it characteristic of lesbian (feminist) communities of the period? How did it compare to other lesbian (feminist) communities in Australia? How did different women come to belong to Canberra's lesbian (feminist) community? How did the individual experiences of the women I interviewed compare with one another? How did each woman come to identify as a lesbian? What were the similarities and differences in their experiences of coming out during this supposedly liberated period? Answers to these questions drawn from the collective experiences of the eight women provide the basis for the content and structure of this history.

Beyond the narrators' voices and as a means by which to situate and integrate their narratives historically, 'She Gave Me That Look' brings together the two political movements crucial to any same sex history of this period: gay liberation and women's liberation. Many histories have been published about the Gay Liberation Movement, fewer have been published about the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), and fewer again have tried to encompass both. Gay liberation histories tend to include only a token mention of the feminist divide - when lesbians no longer able to face the internalised misogyny of their male peers supposedly left in droves to join the sisterhood. Histories of the recent feminist past, on the other hand, tend to focus on women's liberation with a token mention of the lavender menace period when lesbians demanded that their straight sisters address their internalised homophobia.3 This history builds upon these activist-based histories but is also indebted to the wider field of lesbian and gay history.4

'She Gave Me That Look' deliberately brings to the fore the experiences of those who lived lesbian lives after the initial wave of gay and women's liberation had passed - women who did not have anything to do with the original movements. At their peak and in the decade that followed their inception these movements had the phenomenal ability to affect those beyond their specific location as well as those not directly involved in either gay or feminist activism. Much has been written about the positive impact of these movements which gave rise to concepts like coming out and sexism. Less has been written about any negative or after affects, although it has been acknowledged that gay liberation may have made it harder, and not easier, for some

3 Two histories that manage to avoid tokenism by addressing both lesbianism and feminism are: Becki L. Ross, The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation, University of Toronto Press, Canada, 1995; and Arlene Stein, Sense and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

4 This literature is discussed in more detail in Chapter One.
Introduction

people to come out. It is difficult to estimate accurately the influence and impact of gay and women's liberation on the lives of the eight women I interviewed and yet, both movements did affect their life experiences and the meanings they ascribed to those experiences. Without the concepts that evolved from the movements, it is unlikely that the narrators would have told their stories in the way that they did and it is equally improbable that I would have interviewed them about their lesbian experiences. It is in this social and political context, at the intersection of feminism and lesbianism as it came to exist in Canberra during the 1970s and early 1980s, that this thesis is situated.

Structured around the idea that theory, activism, knowledge and change do not exist independently of one another outside the bodies of those who experience them, but are rather things that are constantly re-created in relation to each other via the lived experience of flesh and blood beings, this history looks at the lives of those who were not the movers or the shakers of either gay or women's liberation in Canberra to explore new ground.

This history then, looks back to the time when a lesbian (feminist) community first existed in Canberra and traces how and why it came to exist in the way that it did. In geographical terms, the establishment of a women's house was instrumental in allowing second wave feminism to thrive in Canberra. The house acted as a base for political activity but more than that, it provided a dynamic space where women could meet, talk and socialise. Over time, the combination of political activity and women-only space provided the right ingredients for a lesbian (feminist) community to emerge. Although I touch briefly on many of the issues of concern to the women who were involved in the grassroots women's movement in Canberra this is not intended to be a history of their political achievements; it is rather a detailed account of how the feminist – and then lesbian (feminist) – communities came to have a 'home'. In recent years, the impact of feminism in the public sphere in Australia has received the attention of researchers whereas the day-to-day machinations of the women's

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5 Joan Nestle, amongst others, has written eloquently about queer life in the decades prior to gay liberation in America. She has described the close-knit sense of community born of living a double life. It was not a simple transition for lesbians and gays who had lived so long partially closeted to 'come out'. The emergence of gay liberation sent many of them further into the closet and forced the disintegration of their communities. For an edited collection of biographical stories about queer life prior to gay liberation see Joan Nestle (ed.), The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader, Alyson Publications, Boston, 1992.

movement and the emergence of communities beyond the political have not. Since its inception, there has been no shortage of literature weighing up the gains and successes of the women’s movement in Australia but little has been written that looks in any detail at the trials and tribulations of local women’s liberation groups as they struggled to keep going throughout the 1970s. These less researched aspects of Australia’s feminist past are the historical context for the narratives of the eight women I interviewed.

‘She Gave Me That Look’ is broadly divided into three distinct parts: the first part covers methodology, historiography and context; the second part documents the emergence of Canberra’s Women’s Liberation Movement and the lesbian (feminist) community that evolved out of it; and the third part explores the same sex experiences of the eight narrators and their involvement in Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. First, however, in this introductory chapter I begin by outlining a broader context in which it is possible to situate this local history. I explain why this history, based on the lives of ‘ordinary’ lesbians, is an important addition to the slow-to-emerge field of lesbian and gay history in Australia; make some introductory comments about the problems inherent in including oral testimonies in lesbian history; offer a working definition of key terms used throughout this history; provide an overview of each of the chapters to follow; and, by way of a series of short biographies, introduce each of the narrators.
Introduction

Expanding the lesbian and gay past: beyond key figures and the so-called revolution

In the 1960s and 1970s a new political consciousness based on the notion of ‘liberation’ emerged and spread throughout the west. As the Cold War began to dissipate most capitalist countries were confronted by massive ideological crises. Student uprisings, the mobilisation of the new left, the resistance to imperialism and the escalating war in Vietnam all contributed to a growing atmosphere of global unrest, civil disobedience and the emergence of a growing counterculture. It was out of this milieu, as thousands took to the streets waving anti-war and civil rights banners, that a number

![Figure 1 Canberra Moratorium March, 1970.](image)

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8 In this thesis I confine my interest to the English-speaking west, or more accurately put, those countries where English is the official first language. Whilst I focus primarily on Australia and its relationship to America and to a lesser extent Britain, I do acknowledge the unique situations of New Zealand, Canada and Ireland as English-speaking countries similar to Australia, which are often overlooked in discussions of the west. Like Australia these countries have their own unique histories which exist in complex relation to America and/or Britain.

9 In Australia, whilst the professed aims of the Moratorium were ‘to bring about the immediate, unconditional and unilateral withdrawal of all Allied troops from South Vietnam and to bring about the abolition of the National Service Act’, it was the first of these that was most seriously intended. The second, according to some sources, was simply a ploy to ‘attract youthful support ... from ... those likely to be subject to call up.’ For more discussion of these issues as they were played out in Australia see N. E. Lauritz, *The Vietnam Moratorium*, The Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1970, especially p. 7.
of mass-based protest movements came to exist more concretely in the west.\textsuperscript{10} Of these movements, the Black, Gay and Women’s Liberation Movements were especially successful, their influence and impact still noticeable today.\textsuperscript{11}

In their early years, these protest movements were propelled and sustained by rage, passion and the belief that revolutionary change was not only possible it was imminent. Earlier battles that had been waged over similar causes were largely

\begin{center}
\textit{We feel very strongly about conscription and the freedom of the individual …}

Women are conscripted every day into their personalised slave kitchens. Can you, with your mind filled with the moratorium, spare a thought for their freedom, identity, minds and emotions. They’re women and your stomach is full. It suits you to keep women in the kitchens and underpaid menial jobs, and with the children …

You won’t make an issue of abortion, equal pay and child minding centres, because they’re women’s matters and under your veneer you are brothers to the pig politicians.”
\end{center}

\textbf{Figure 2}

Kate Jennings addressing Sydney Moratorium, 1970.

\textsuperscript{10} In Australia, one of the earliest Women’s Liberation leaflets, ‘Only the Chains Have Changed’, was distributed at an Anti-Vietman War demonstration in Sydney in December 1969. It stated that women ‘like the Vietnamese, can only be free of oppression when the profit makers no longer have the power to determine [their] lives’. For a personal account of this event, as well as a more extensive discussion about the relationship between Women’s Liberation in Australia and the New Left, see Ann Curthoys, \textit{For and Against Feminism. A Personal Journey into Feminist Theory and History}, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, especially pp. 79-94.

\textsuperscript{11} The infinite number of liberation-inspired organisations, groups, institutions and events that continue to thrive today are testament to the success of the original movements three decades ago. Women’s/Gender Studies, Black Studies, Australian Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and most recently, Queer Studies, all have their roots in the libatory politics of the 1960s and 1970s; their existence today is indicative of the long-term influence of the earlier protest movements which inspired their inception.
Introduction

overlooked in the stampede to instigate a new world order. It became gradually apparent, however, to those involved in the protest movements and those writing the movements' histories, that these movements had not exploded into being overnight, but rather that they owed their existence to a variety of predecessors. Each of these movements carried its own particular history that began well before the unrest of the 1960s. Historian, John D'Emilio, for example, has traced the roots of gay liberation in America to the homophile organisations of the 1940s and 1950s, convincingly disputing the myth that gay liberation emerged as a direct result of the Stonewall riots in 1969.12 He argues that mass movements of that ilk cannot, and do not, appear out of nothing overnight.13 Margaret Cruikshank reiterated D'Emilio's point a decade later. 'Stonewall', she writes, 'would not have had such an electrifying effect, however, if pioneering advocates of equal rights for homosexuals had not worked from 1950 to 1969 to lay the groundwork for a broad movement'.14 Martin Duberman also takes up this point in his history of the Stonewall riots:

Resistance to oppression takes on the confident form of political organizing only after a certain critical mass of collective awareness of oppression, and a determination to end it, has been reached. ... Resistance to oppression did not begin at Stonewall.15

In addition, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis argue that the influence of the homophile movement is 'only part of the story' and that lesbian and gay bar communities are equally important predecessors of gay liberation.16 D'Emilio's 1983 claim has clearly had a lasting impact; his research has influenced the direction lesbian and gay history has moved in to the extent that his original claim is now accepted as given in the production of our histories.

It is interesting to note, however, that although most historians now concur that gay liberation did not emerge out of the ether, most lesbian and gay histories continue to be based on the assumption that 'liberation' ultimately required a revolutionary rather than reformist approach. Most lesbian and gay histories tend to presume that the

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12 On June 28, 1969 a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village was raided by police. A gay bar being raided was not an unusual event at the time but on this occasion, instead of the routine compliance, patrons of 'the Stonewall' fought back. The ensuing days of rioting changed the face of lesbian and gay life and for a time were credited with starting the Gay Liberation Movement. For a comprehensive history of the Stonewall riots see Martin Duberman, Stonewall, Plume Books, New York, 1994.


15 Duberman, pp. 75 and 99.

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Present day situation of gays and lesbians in the West is the 'best' moment in our history so far; the contemporary 'liberated' moment is seen to represent the best of all possible outcomes. There is little to suggest in lesbian and gay histories written in the 1990s, for example, that the 1990s will also one day be a historical reference point. The present is almost always presented as a static moment in time, a time to reflect on the difficulties and successes of past decades as they pertain to the present, more superior, moment.

There is, for example, an underlying assumption in John D'Emilio's Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, that we have moved in the only possible direction throughout the twentieth-century to be at a unique moment of lesbian and gay 'pride, openness, and community'. Such an assumption is common to many of the early lesbian and gay histories. Only one possible present is allowed in the version of the past told; a present that has relentlessly pursued its course down a radical and revolutionary path despite the occasional reformist hiccup. Homophile organisations, like the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) and the Mattachine Society, tend to be presented in slightly disparaging terms in the early gay and lesbian histories because their agendas are deemed quaintly conservative. DOB's original agenda, for example, was concerned with proving that lesbians were indistinguishable from heterosexuals. In the words of DOB founders (and then lovers of nineteen years) Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon:

> The Lesbian looks, dresses, acts, and is like any other woman. The only thing that distinguishes her as a Lesbian is her choice of another woman as her sex, love or life partner.

The fact that DOB in the late 1960s and 1970s was taken over by those with a more radical agenda has meant that the content of the group's early assertions is lost as a possible (and potentially better or different) direction for the future in gay and lesbian histories. Similarly, the Mattachine Society tends to be lauded for having started out with a radical agenda in 1950, with the conservative take-over and eventual resignation of its founder, Harry Hay, seen as a shame or a divergence from the preferred radical agenda of gay liberatory politics. As Martin Duberman puts it:

> The Mattachine analysis of homosexuality, was, at its inception, startlingly radical. This small group of some dozen men pioneered the notion – which from mid-1953 to 1969 fell out of favor in homophile circles, only to be picked up again by gay activists after 1969 – that gays were a legitimate minority living within a hostile mainstream culture.

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17 D'Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, p. 249.
19 Duberman, Stonewall, p. 77.
Lesbian and gay historians have tended to label reformist actions as conservative and revolutionary ideals as liberatory in their histories of the Gay Liberation Movement. There is little thought given to exploring the possibility of a different direction to the one in which progressive history propels us despite the fact that many of the objectives of the contemporary gay movement echo those of past reformist and assimilationist organisations. I am thinking here of how in the year 2003 it is hard to locate significant differences, aside from sexual orientation, in many lesbian and gay lifestyles. In the English-speaking west, the last twenty years have seen more lesbians choosing to become mothers rather than decrying motherhood as a patriarchal institution; more lesbians and gays choosing to attend church rather than decrying organised religion as being inherently homophobic and in league with the State; more lesbians and gays fighting to have government policy and legislation amended to reflect the equal status of heterosexual and same-sex relationships instead of wanting to smash the whole system; and more same-sex couples getting married rather than denouncing marriage as a heterosexual institution based on patriarchal principles.

This gradual slippage from revolution to assimilationist reform has not gone unnoticed. Each one of these areas has been, and remains, a site of contestation. On the

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issue of lesbian and gay marriage, for example, lesbian Professor of Law, Ruthann Robson, opposes same-sex marriage and domestic partnership rights, wanting instead – in the interests of equality and progress – to abolish marriage altogether.24 Similarly, Paula Ettlebrick argues:

Marriage will not liberate us as lesbians and gay men. In fact, it will constrain us, make us more invisible, force our assimilation into the mainstream, and undermine the goals of gay liberation ... Marriage runs contrary to two of the primary goals of the lesbian and gay movement: the affirmation of gay identity and culture; and the validation of many forms of relationships.25

But Ellen Lewin finds the growing trend towards commitment ceremonies ‘perplexing’. Similarly to Robson and Ettelbrick she asks whether such ceremonies ‘constitute courageous repudiation of the notion that only persons of different sexes may marry’ and therefore act as an active form of ‘resistance to heterosexism’? Or whether they ‘represent instead simple accommodation to the norms of the straight world’? Unlike Robson and Ettelbrick, however, Lewin does not automatically denounce same-sex marriage as reformist. She suggests instead that the answers may well lie in the space between resistance and accommodation, neither one being ‘distinct’ nor ‘mutually exclusive’.26

Lewin’s point is a good one – there are no simple ‘either/or’ solutions but instead many grey areas. In writing our histories it is worth considering that the revolutionary years of the gay movement may not have been as essential as we may think to where we have got today, in terms of rights, equality and desire. Perhaps, had the conservative agenda of the homophile organisations been adhered to, we may even have reached this point sooner. Perhaps the ‘revolution-that-wasn’t’ didn’t actually need to take place. Questioning the revolutionary-bias of our histories may allow us to look more critically at aspects of the past that have thus far been overlooked. Two of the narrators in this history, Erin and Leigh, comment on their experiences of sexual harrassment at the hands of other feminist women in the early 1980s. Stories like theirs sit uncomfortably in lesbian and feminist versions of the past in part because of this reluctance to let go of revolutionary ideals. Put more plainly, we don’t like to admit


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that we may have got some things wrong and we certainly don’t want to write about them in our histories. At a minimum though, we need to acknowledge that the quest to revolutionise the world may have unwittingly resulted in some poorly chosen actions.

Furthermore, it also seems somehow ironic that despite our broadened understanding of the conditions that made gay and women’s liberation possible, our histories of these movements limit themselves to the turbulent years of the ‘revolution’ (and in some cases, the period preceding them). Yet the bodies of those at the forefront of these movements were not the only ones on whom the struggle for equality and liberation was written. Largely absent from our record of the past are histories about the experiences of lesbians in the feminist environment that existed after the revolutionary fervour of women’s (and gay) liberation had died down leaving ‘in its place a diverse collection of feminist groups, organisations, actions and activities’. 27 As well as looking at the activist-based histories so far written we need to continue the quest to look for the stories we haven’t yet heard or thought to tell; we need to look beyond political gains and the ‘leaders’ of the movements for the voices of those who we have unwittingly silenced. The period immediately preceding women’s and gay liberation has been effectively addressed by gay, lesbian and feminist historians 28 but we have only just began to add the experiences of those who came out during and after the advent of the liberation movements to our histories. 29 The more stories and experiences we are able to represent in our histories ultimately broadens our knowledge of the gay, lesbian and feminist past. Today, one obvious means of expanding our histories of the


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recent past is to include the oral testimonies of those who were not key figures in the movements.

In 1997, writing about the women's movement in Australia, feminist academic Chilla Bulbeck asked the pertinent question 'What has the women's movement meant to women who were not at its helm?' At this point in our history, it is a question worth asking. The opportunity to include oral sources in accounts of the recent feminist past exists in Australia today, but sadly, so does a certain reluctance of many early activists to accept themselves as historic subjects. This reluctance has contributed to few histories being written. And yet the most common solution of getting those feminists who remain connected to feminist endeavours like Women's Studies to acknowledge and accept their historic value does not solve the problem entirely. For their experiences, as long term 'career' feminists, only represent the experiences of a limited few. Bulbeck summarises the contemporary situation as it relates to the recent feminist past in Australia as follows:

... in the 1990s we are still apt to hear some feminist stories more than others. Our understanding of the women's liberation movement has largely come to us through the women who 'made' it happen ...

What of those women no longer active as feminists? What of those who got involved in feminism a few years after, or even a decade after, the advent of women's liberation? Building on Bulbeck's analyses in a more specific manner, this history explores how the Women's Liberation Movement impacted on the lives of eight women who came out as lesbians, or who as lesbians became involved in, a feminist activist environment five, ten, or fifteen years after the women's movement had first emerged. Part III of this history contains the personal narratives of the eight women and includes their experiences of the lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra in the 1970s and 1980s. By deliberately choosing narrators who were not involved in the early years of women's liberation but who later came into contact with Canberra's feminist community, my intention has been to provide some more complex detail

30 Bulbeck, Living Feminism, p. 2.

31 A recent conference I attended ostensibly about the history of Women's Studies at the University of Sydney, was witness (perhaps for the first time) to the acknowledgement of a widespread embarrassment about being involved in the formative years of the Women's Liberation Movement in Australia. This collective confession, as discussed at the conference, was believed to be in no small part due to the difficulties inherent in acknowledging oneself as an historic subject. For a comprehensive discussion of these aspects of the conference and their wider implications, see Judith Ion, 'Return of the Repressed: Feminism in the Quad', Australian Feminist Studies, Vol. 12, No. 25, 1997, pp. 141-4; Judith Ion, 'Unravelling Our Past', pp. 107-16.

32 Bulbeck, Living Feminism, p. 2.
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within a tradition of broad brush stroke history that focuses on key figures and pivotal moments. As historian Graham Willett argues, the problem with such generalised accounts of the recent gay and lesbian (and I would suggest feminist) past is that ‘they create too neat a picture of what was, in fact, a very complex situation’. These hidden and silenced aspects of the lesbian (feminist) past are crucial to the histories we write of the period. If our histories do not include the stories of those women who came out as lesbians in the feminist environment that existed in the years that followed the advent of women’s liberation, a large element of the past risks being lost to future generations.

Figure 3 Women’s Liberation Movement march. Photograph by Sue Pepperell.

Oral testimony

The inclusion of oral testimony in history is not, however, without its difficulties and critics. Criticisms of oral history come in many guises and cover virtually all aspects of it: from the choice of interviewees; to the kinds of information collected in the interview process; to the perceived biases inherent in interpretations of interview material. According to Kennedy and Davis, the most frequently cited criticism of oral history considers it too subjective and idiosyncratic to be reliable as a basis for

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Critics have argued that the number of variables involved in oral history make it inherently unreliable as a source on which to base accurate and factual histories. As critic, Patrick O'Farrell says, 'the basic problem with oral testimony about the past is that its truth (when it is true) is not primarily about what happened or how things were, but about how the past has been recollected'. It is interesting to note that in the face of such criticism the majority of oral historians do not deny the subjective essence of oral testimony, rather they see it as valuable:

One of the main attractions of oral testimony is that it can provide more 'subjective' information about the past. It is very useful for descriptions of experience and feelings, for insights into personalities or for discovering what really lay behind the words and manoeuvres of the past.

For many oral historians the focus of their interest lies in how the past is recollected and what that process says about the present, rather than being concerned about when things happened and what they were (as in events, actions, times and dates). The narratives included in 'She Gave Me That Look' are not used to ascertain dates and places so much as to provide information about the experiences of a group of women whose lives have been left out of gay, lesbian and feminist histories to date. Many critics of oral history have been unable to accept that a broadening out of the definition of 'history' to include oral testimony has the potential to be rich and rewarding. Their criticisms have tended to take on an 'us' and 'them' standpoint. And yet, oral history does not wish to denounce other kinds of history. It aims rather - as 'She Gave Me That Look' does - to transform history into something more democratic and representative.

Oral history advocate, David Henige maintains that 'one of the more frequent and telling criticisms of oral history is that, by attempting to democratise the past, it ... render[s] it trivial'. And indeed oral history critic, Patrick O'Farrell, has accused pioneering oral historian, Paul Thompson, of 'playing god' in choosing whose lives are interesting enough to be included in particular histories. O'Farrell's opinion of Thompson's egalitarian 'oral history-paradise' indicates his extreme distaste for the oral history process:

The idea that all lives are of interest to the oral historian is attractively egalitarian, but it makes nonsense of the discipline of history ... Perhaps in his oral-history...

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paradise we should all lodge our tapes on death and listen to the others’ reminiscences through all eternity – an experience to my mind more fit for the other place, as the euphemism has it.38

Apart from making the point that the life of ‘the common man’ (sic) is boring, O’Farrell also makes the suggestion that if ‘ordinary man’ (sic) is made the subject of history he will assume himself to be enough and sufficient and consequently will not seek to improve himself. If the flood of oral history is not stopped, says O’Farrell, it has the potential to sink western culture into ‘stultifying, tiresome, slack ordinariness’.39 In other words to democratise the past or the present, by means of recording the lives of those absent from the historical record, is ultimately to embrace the mundane, the ordinary and the trivial. To O’Farrell this obviously spells doom, whereas to Thompson, and for the purposes of this history, it spells liberation, freedom and a truer representation of past and present. According to Thompson, oral history provides the means by which to gain access to the lives of those who have been excluded from, and silenced in, the existing documentary histories. In his words:

Oral evidence can achieve something more pervasive, and more fundamental to history ... Oral evidence, by transforming the ‘objects’ of study into ‘subjects’, makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid and heart-rending, but truer.40

Similarly, in 1984, feminists Sylvie Vandecasteele-Schweitzer and Daniele Voldman argued that without oral sources the task of writing the history of the present cannot be done. This, they decreed, was even more essential for women’s history ‘since women have committed much less to writing than have men. They have used speech much more than the written word’.41 Like Vandecasteele-Schweitzer and Voldman, I believe that the inclusion of oral narratives in women’s history allows for the creation of better, more representative, histories. ‘She Gave Me That Look’ aims to build on but look beyond activist-based histories to those women who came out in the 1970s and early 1980s but who weren’t involved in the early years of women’s or gay liberation. By including the oral narratives of these women in ‘She Gave Me That Look’, this history’s aims are threefold: to help redress the balance of lesbian versus gay histories; to illustrate how important lesbian content is to feminist histories; and to prioritise the experiences of ‘ordinary’ women over that of key figures.

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Towards a working definition of key terms

‘She Gave Me That Look’ is a fluid history, which within its 1965-84 focus, moves backwards and forwards between lesbian and feminist contexts in its telling. Based on the premise that this period witnessed the emergence of a symbiotic relationship between lesbianism and feminism that had never before existed, it is a history that cannot simply nor adequately be told from either one of these perspectives. I use the term ‘feminism’ here, and throughout this history, to refer to the complex and far-reaching western phenomenon which initially viewed women’s inferior position in society as a fundamental issue of equal rights. Feminism has, of course, over time grown beyond its original parameters. Today it encompasses a broad range of issues that do not necessarily directly concern women nor do they necessarily include an explicit gender component. This history does not seek to claim or present a feminist perspective on lesbian experience(s), it aims rather to situate feminism as one aspect (admittedly an important one) of lesbian experience during a particularly volatile feminist period in the west. Throughout this history I have chosen to use the term ‘lesbian (feminist)’; the bracketed use of the word ‘feminist’ is intended to act as a subtle reminder of the underlying lesbian motivation and intent of this history whilst also acknowledging the strong feminist presence. Since the 1970s, defining ‘lesbian’ has become increasingly complex. In the section that follows, I explore why this may have happened and provide a working definition of ‘lesbian’ as used in this history.

In the 1970s, reclaiming lesbians from the past became popular in lesbian feminist circles; regardless of whether they identified as lesbians themselves, women such as Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West were claimed as lesbian foresisters. Often, it was considered sufficient if women lived together in a seemingly exclusive way or spoke of loving one another. The following excerpts taken variously from Virginia and Vita’s letters and diaries indicate part of the reason why they were reclaimed.

Monday 19 February 1923
She is a pronounced Sapphist, & may, thinks Ethel Sands, have an eye on me, old though I am. Nature might have sharpened her faculties. Snob as I am, I trace her passions 500 years back, & they become romantic to me, like old yellow wine.

*Virginia Woolf (diary entry)*

21 January 1926
I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia ... I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way ... I miss you even more than I could have believed; and I was prepared to miss you a good deal. So this letter is just really a squeal of pain. It is

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incredible how essential to me you have become ... Damn you, spoilt creature; I shan’t
make you love me any the more by giving myself away like this. But oh my dear, I
can’t be clever and stand-offish with you: I love you too much for that. Too truly
Letter from Vita to Virginia

Thursday 20 May 1926
Vita comes to lunch tomorrow, which will be a great amusement & pleasure. I am
amused at my relations with her: left so ardent in January - & now what? ... Am I in
love with her? But what is love? Her being ‘in love’ (it must be comma’d thus) with
me, excites & flatters; & interests.

Virginia Woolf (diary entry)

17 August 1926
You mention Virginia: it is simply laughable. I love Virginia, as who wouldn’t? but
really, my sweet, one’s love for Virginia is a very different thing: a mental thing, a
spiritual thing ... I have gone to bed with her (twice) but that’s all; and I told you that
before, I think.

Letter from Vita to Harold

Virginia Woolf was forty-one in 1923, her admirer and ‘lover’, the debonair Vita
Sackville-West, ten years younger. From today’s perspective neither one of them
would likely be considered ‘old’, though perhaps Woolf’s ‘old though I am’ refers
more to the years separating herself and Sackville-West than to her actual age. As
always, this moment in history, as represented by a series of words, only exists as
something we can speculate about from the time and place we occupy.

American scholar Martha Vicinus maintains that precisely because we can only
speculate about it, lesbian history will always remain a history of discontinuities. It is
unlikely, she says, that we will ever come to know precisely what women in the past
did with each other in bed or out, for we are ‘not able to reconstruct fully how and
under what circumstances lesbian communities evolved’. In her ‘Introduction’ to The
Diary of the Lady Ann Clifford (1923) Vita Sackville-West prophetically muses: ‘We
should ourselves be sorry to think that posterity should judge us by a patchwork of
our letters, preserved by chance, independent of their context’. And although
Sackville-West is not referring here to the problems inherent in reclaiming a

45 Glendinning, Vita. The Life of V. Sackville-West, p. 165.
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continuous lesbian past, her words do carry a certain bittersweet resonance and relevance to this more contemporary dilemma. So too, does her belief that irrespective of such ‘limitations it is necessary to arrive at some conclusions’ and to allow ‘certain facts’ to emerge. Vita and Virginia have both been claimed as part of a lesbian past, as part of the story leading to the present. And I would argue, rightly so.

Although the relationship between the aristocratic Vita Sackville-West and Bloomsbury darling, Virginia Woolf, has no immediately recognisable Australian equivalent, a number of similar same-sex attachments between women did exist in Australia. Further to their reclaimed British and American counterparts, these attachments may provide Australian lesbians with a more geographically appropriate link between the past and the present. Historian Ruth Ford’s preliminary research on the love letters between Mary Parkinson and Evelyn Brown, as well as Debbie and Monte Punshon, provide valuable insight into the situation of women in Australia who had significant relationships with other women in and around the 1920s.

18 January 1918

Sweetheart Mine? …
You care or seem to care more than I ever thought you capable of; whilst into my heart, soul, life, being there is creeping that indestructible little parasite – a love for you – … You will probably wonder why such words as these can be written by one of your own sex – why? because all my sympathy in life is with my own kind … Now sweetheart in this little matter of ourselves – what is it to be? you the younger – I the older … With me it is all or nothing and you cannot blame me for hesitating where angels fear to tread … Are you willing and ready to give the same return – … Yours always, M.49

C. 1916-1924

My Own Darling,
Words are inadequate to express my love for you … If you were not mine own why the first thing I would do would be to make You so … After all these years I love you more than ever … I need you more every day so much that I cannot bear you out of my sight … Dearest you know [I want] ‘You’ just You to myself every day every night all time …
Always yours, Deb50

Contextually speaking there is a crucially important difference between Mary Parkinson’s and Deb’s letters and the letters and diary entries of Vita and Virginia.


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Due to their prominent life stations, Vita’s and Virginia’s letters, diaries and fiction have all been widely published providing a solid background to their relationship. The letter from Mary Parkinson to Evelyn Brown, on the other hand, only saw publication in the press during a 1920 divorce case initiated by Evelyn’s husband. And comparatively bereft of context, Deb’s letter to Monte was only discovered after Monte’s death hidden in the secret pocket of a writing case. Whilst Monte herself provided some information about her twelve-year relationship with Deb – including the fact that Deb died soon after leaving her for another life – to this day, Deb’s identity remains a mystery.

There may well be a plethora of unearthed love letters, diaries, scrapbooks, photographs and ephemera in private collections across Australia which may provide evidence about intimate relationships between women but until they are ‘found’ historians can only surmise about their existence and how such women may have identified themselves. In the meantime speculation about such women’s lives remains restricted to the few letters and scrapbooks that have surfaced, as well as the limited press coverage and court case records, which identify various women who failed to hide their ‘lesbian’ tracks. In researching and writing lesbian history in Australia, it is important to include as many women’s stories as can be found but it remains equally important to note the differences between same sex desire in the past and the experiences of contemporary lesbians. Similarly, exploring the differences and similarities between Australian same sex experiences and those of their British and American counterparts over time is an important aspect of the historical project. Identifying or living as a lesbian in England in the 1920s, for example, is a very different experience from being a lesbian in contemporary Australia, or America, especially since the inception of gay and women’s liberation in the 1960s and 1970s.

The question the lesbian historian cannot reasonably or ethically ever avoid is ‘Who defines “lesbian”?’ It is a question that over the years has become increasingly difficult to answer caught up as it is with ideas of representation and identity as well as the notion of proof or evidence. For example, even though we tend to include them in our contemporary story about the lesbian past, can we really say that Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf were ‘lesbians’? Both were, after all, respectable married ladies. Or

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51 Most of Monte’s private papers and photographs no longer exist – Monte’s friends believe that her relatives destroyed her personal effects because they disapproved of her intimate relationships with women. See Ford, ‘Contested Desires’, p. 242.

52 See Monte Punshon, ‘In Love with a Memory’ in Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling (eds), Words from the Same Heart, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1987.
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was perhaps Vita - by virtue of her other same-sex intimacies and her unconventional marriage to Harold Nicolson - the 'lesbian' and Virginia simply the object of her affections? Was their relationship a sexually intimate one? Would this alone be enough 'proof' to warrant labelling theirs 'a lesbian relationship' and them 'lesbians'? Is it feasible to try to search out 'sameness' across time and place like this? Or, as New Zealand lesbian Alison J. Laurie suggests, do we need constantly to 're-define what we mean by lesbian, what we mean by sex, and how we understand love' in our quest 'to find the others' from the past?

Froms the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, when European sexologists Karl Ulrichs (1825-1895), Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) and Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) published their research, homosexuality (and lesbianism) came to be understood throughout the west as a medical condition manifesting itself in aberrant or pathological behaviour. Such understanding of lesbianism - which had tragic consequences for thousands of women in both physical and psychological terms - was replaced in the 1970s by a plethora of new definitions as lesbian (feminists) passionately defended their chosen identities. 'Lesbianism is one road to freedom - freedom from oppression by men' wrote Martha Shelley in 1969; 'A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion' wrote the New York

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54 Alison J. Laurie, ‘From Kamp Girls to Political Dykes: Finding the Others Through Thirty-odd Years as a Lesbian from Aotearoa/New Zealand’ in Julia Penelope and Sarah Valentine (eds), Finding the Lesbians: Personal Accounts from around the World, The Crossing Press, California, 1990, p. 84.


56 Throughout the twentieth-century, prior to this time, evidence suggests that lesbians and gay men who found one another in the forces, in bars and at beats often created their own identities in defiance of the ones offered them by the sexologists. Unfortunately though, these radical souls were few in number and their focus tended towards survival not overtly challenging the status quo.

57 Martha Shell[e]y, 'Notes of a Radical Lesbian' (1969) in Robin Morgan (ed.), Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement, Vintage Books, New York, 1970, p. 306. Martha Shell[e]y’s name is missing the second ‘e’ in this collection. In the interests of clarity throughout this thesis I refer to her in my text as ‘Shelley’ and add square brackets in footnotes when referring to this article.
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Radicalesbians in 1970\(^{58}\). No longer was lesbianism merely a type of sexual behaviour, a congenital defect, a sadly defeatist description of self,\(^{59}\) or a label proudly taken by a defiant few. It was now an identity with a battle to wage. Lesbianism was much more than a pre-destined or chosen emotional and/or physical attraction to the same sex, it carried the revolutionary potential to change the world.\(^{60}\)

As indicated by the three short definitions above, there are innumerable examples of the new politicised lesbian identity. As a further indication of the elaborate nature of some of the more radical definitions, I reproduce here a more lengthy example which can be read as representative of the separatist end of the scale in this definitional minefield which was to plague lesbian feminism for more than a decade.\(^{61}\) Jointly authored in 1973, the following definition presents some of the arguments as to why lesbianism was much more than a question of sexual preference:

We do, in fact, prefer to sleep with women because we are lesbians; because we love women; because we see women as the only true 'people', and because our complete identity, and source of support, is from other women. We not only 'prefer' to sleep with women; we love it and we would not ever consider sleeping with men. Not because we hate men, which we do, but because (even if we could be attracted to a man, which is pretty far-fetched) all men are our enemy. Men, as a class, are the oppressors of women; and it is all of men's institutions ... that keep lesbians and other women oppressed and exploited every day of our lives ... We do not want to fraternize with men, our enemy.\(^{62}\)


\(^{59}\) I am referring here to a period when the acknowledgement of one's self as an invert or a member of the third sex equated with accepting that one was destined to live out a life of misery and secrecy. This sort of philosophy is evident in Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness as well as in the 'lesbian pulp fiction' available in the 1950s and 1960s by writers like Ann Aldrich, Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor. See Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness (1928), Corgi Books, London, 1968 edition; Ann Aldridge, We Walk Alone (1955) and We Too Must Love (1958); Ann Bannon, Odd Girl Out (1957), I Am Woman (1959), Women in the Shadows (1959), Journey to a Woman (1960), Beebo Brinker (1962); Valerie Taylor, A World Without Men (1963), Return to Lesbos (1963), Journey to Fulfilment (1964). In the interests of conserving space further publication details of these books are included in the bibliography. For more on lesbian pulp fiction published in the 1920s through the 1960s see Dawn B. Sova, Passion and Penance: The Lesbian in Pulp Fiction, Faber and Faber, London, 1998; and for the 1940s through the 1970s see Jaye Zimet, Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction 1949-1969, Penguin, USA, 1999.

\(^{60}\) For an overview of differences between the array of essentialist and postmodern lesbian identities that have arisen since the late 1960s see Joan McCarthy, 'Identity, Existence and Passionate Politics' in Ide O'Carrol and Eoin Collins (eds), Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the Twenty-first Century, Cassell, London and New York, 1995, pp. 99-109.

\(^{61}\) Debates over the definition of lesbian still occur in certain feminist environments but remain for the most part on the fringes rather than occupying centre stage.

\(^{62}\) Alice, Gordon, Debbie and Mary, 'Separatism' (1973) in Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Julia Penelope (eds), For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology, Onlywomen Press, London, 1988, p. 34.
Introduction

In the 1980s another new definition of lesbian was to ‘strike like a shock wave against the [women’s] movement’s foundation’. In 1983 Pat Califia’s claim of lesbian identity outraged many feminists, especially those with a separatist agenda:

I live with my woman lover of five years. I have lots of casual sex with women. Once in a while, I have casual sex with gay men. I have a three-year relationship with a homosexual man who doesn’t use the term gay. And I call myself a lesbian.

In the queer 1990s, these definitions of lesbian would be able to co-exist by virtue of their collective desire to undermine and explode the hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality. However, in the lesbian feminist climate of the 1980s, the introduction of definitions like Califia’s set the stage for an ongoing battle. Although I do not wish to minimise the damage done to many women caught in the cross-fire of these definitional debates, I am nonetheless tempted to suggest that it is in part due to these heated exchanges in the 1970s and 1980s that the word ‘lesbian’ came to be an almost acceptable term in the mainstream 1990s. Furthermore, I suggest that these debates illustrate how pivotal the role of identity politics was for a generation (or two) of lesbian (feminist) women.

From the 1990s, the lingering effect of the passionate lesbian identity debates can be seen in the frequent acknowledgment by those trying to define ‘lesbian’ that the term is a complex one. As Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope wrote in 1993: ‘We live in the postmodernist, post structuralist (and, some would say, postfeminist) era, during a period when the term Lesbian is problematic, even when used nonpejoratively by a self-declared Lesbian.’ Or as curators Ruth Ford, Lyned Isaac and Rebecca Jones wrote about their Australian exhibition ‘Forbidden Love – Bold Passion: Lesbian Stories 1900s-1990s’:

The very term ‘lesbian’ – as used in the exhibition – is not adequate. Yet, we have assembled the diverse identities and meanings that individual women have brought to their stories, under the banner ‘lesbian’. They are presented here for

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For the purposes of ‘She Gave Me That Look’, my working definition of ‘lesbian’ for the 1965-84 period takes into account and holds implicit the convoluted history of the term ‘lesbian’ in the west, from the pathologisation and medicalisation of it by sexologists around the turn of the twentieth-century, to the internal battles waged over it in the 1970s and 1980s. It also takes into account the relationship between self-image and self-identification including the effects of a range of aspects from that of internalised homophobia to that of joyful pride. It acknowledges the importance of historical, geographical and cultural context in any kind of sexual labelling be that external or internal and allows for fluidity over time. This expansive working definition nonetheless holds tight to the one aspect of lesbianism that has arguably been consistent across the twentieth-century in the west: that lesbianism, at its base, is an intimate and usually sexual connection between women; a connection that goes beyond that which is deemed ‘normal’ in a heterosexual economy. For the purposes of this history then, and bearing in mind the time period it covers, ‘lesbian’ refers to women whose sexual identity reflected the fact that their primary relationships were same-sex relationships that went beyond the bounds of friendship.

Outlining the thesis: a history in three parts

My intention in this introductory chapter has been to lay the foundations for ‘She Gave Me That Look’ and to define key terms. In the context of the history of the recent gay, lesbian and feminist past, I have stressed the importance of including oral narratives as a means by which it is possible to create a more representative and democratic version of the past. I have further argued the importance of looking beyond activist-based histories for untold and overlooked stories. Following a short introduction to my cast of eight narrators, the subsequent history is divided into three parts.

Part I. Historiography, Methodology and Context, is made up of two chapters. Chapter One provides a historiographic review of the literature which has influenced and inspired me in the process of researching and writing this history and examines the array of problems I unearthed when I went in search of a methodology appropriate

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to the sort of history I wanted to write. In Chapter Two I develop a broader context for this history by contrasting the emergence and evolution of gay liberation in America against its equivalent in Australia; I provide a general overview of the first years of gay liberation in Australia, as well as making a note of pivotal lesbian (feminist) events as they happened in Australia. In the final section of this chapter, I bring the focus back to Canberra, paving the way for the localised history that follows.

Part II. Towards a history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra is made up of two chapters which document the first ten years of Canberra’s Women’s Liberation Movement. Chapter Three covers the early years of women’s liberation in Canberra (1970-74); and Chapter Four covers the later years (1975-79). This history of the movement, drawn from primary sources and illuminated where relevant by the oral testimonies of the narrators, brings to life the feminist context from which Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community emerged in the late 1970s and to which all eight narrators belonged.

Part III. Personal narratives consists of two chapters. Chapters Five and Six feature the eight women’s narratives and map the experiences that led them in the direction of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. In Chapter Five, I have organised the pre-feminist experiences of the narrators into three main categories. The first of these sections, ‘Feeling Different’, is centred around the narrators initial awareness of homosexuality and how or whether that had an impact on their sense of self. The second section, ‘Discovering Sex’ documents the early or first consensual sexual experiences of the narrators. And the third section, focuses on the coming out experiences of the narrators as they take their final steps in the process of coming to identify as lesbians. Based on the personal narratives of the eight women, Chapter Six documents what it was like to ‘find the lesbians’ in Canberra in the late 1960s, the 1970s and the early 1980s. The latter part of this period, I suggest, witnessed the emergence and solidification of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community, a community which came to exist in Canberra – unlike in many other cities - without an explosive collision between gay, pre-WLM lesbian, and lesbian feminist worlds.
THE NARRATORS
A CAST OF EIGHT

This section contains a one page introduction to each of the eight women I interviewed in 1994. A list of interview dates is provided in Appendix A. The preliminary interview questionnaire; and the interview guide and questions can be found in Appendix B.

These introductions outline the women’s backgrounds as summarised from the information offered by them in response to the opening interview question: ‘Could you tell me a bit about your background and what you see as the milestones in your life, particularly concentrating on the 1965-84-ish period?’

I have also included quotes from each of the women regarding their awareness of when they first realised they were attracted to other women. These quotes are not the result of any direct question, and have been lifted from varying points in each of the interviews. They are intended, via their use of a first person narrative, to provide an introduction to the disparate personalities, lifestyles and voices of each of the eight women. Further to providing an introduction to the narrators, the inclusion of these brief biographies at this point in the thesis aims also to act as a reference point which the reader can then consult as necessary in the course of reading ‘She Gave Me That Look’.

The eight women are listed here in chronological order by year of birth: Pat (b. 1952); Emma (b. 1952); Leigh (b. 1953); Dee (b. 1953); Kate (b. 1955); Jocelyn (b. 1960); Erin (b. 1961); Teresa (b. 1961).
The narrators: a cast of eight

Pat (b. 1952)

1974 (age 22)
I hadn’t felt any attraction to women whilst I was still married – but not long after it broke up I had a girlfriend I worked with, she lived in Yass. She came over to share my house, and I found I had a bit of a crush on her ... I wasn’t sure how to deal with it. I don’t think I thought of myself as um, possibly a lesbian. I know that my husband then, rather liked Margaret and I felt jealous, very jealous that he might ask Margaret out ... Then I went over to England and ... there was this woman that I met when I was travelling around Europe on bus trips. We were both on two bus trips and I remember one time she said ‘God, I think more about women than I do about men’ and she got up and walked away, you know. And I thought, ‘Yeah, I do too!’

Born in 1952, Pat spent the first eleven years of her life in Melbourne and the following four in England. In 1967, following the relocation of the government department for whom her father worked, Pat’s family moved to Canberra. The youngest of four children, Pat describes her family as being ‘very split’, with some fifteen years difference between the oldest and the youngest two children. Upon moving to Canberra Pat did another year’s schooling before, in 1968, joining the Public Service as a data processing operator in an office of ninety or so women. Three years later, in 1971, at age nineteen, she married. The marriage was short-lived and was over by 1974. Pat remained in the Public Service for over twenty five years but during that time was also involved in a volunteer capacity with Women’s Services. She eventually found the courage to leave the security of the Public Service and fulfilled a long-term goal to attend university. Pat has since left Canberra to live in a warmer climate.
The narrators: a cast of eight

Emma (b. 1952)

1960 (age 8)
I was always convinced, and still am, that for me it was genetic. It was not a choice for me, there was absolutely no choice. It was there, it was always going to be that way. I remember first being conscious of it when I was about eight and certainly didn’t name it as such, you know, didn’t think ‘Oh Wow, I’m attracted to girls!’ but I knew there was something very different about me.

1965 (age 13)
When I was about twelve or thirteen I knew that it was an ‘attraction’ and then I was attracted to [female] school teachers and to other girls. But still would never use that word ‘lesbian’. I think I was more in the sort of [pause] – Like The Well of Loneliness made a really big impact on me and I saw myself as a bit that way, a bit of the third sex.

Emma was born in NSW in 1952. Her family moved to Canberra when she was about fifteen where she continued her schooling up to and including sixth form. After finishing school Emma worked in a laboratory at the Australian National University (ANU) for some thirteen years although she admits that she hated the work. Upon leaving the ANU Emma joined the Public Service before moving into the community sector where she was involved in drug and alcohol counselling and establishing needle exchange programs. She returned briefly to the Public Service but eventually ended up working in Women’s Services where she remained for many years. Her parents still live in Canberra but Emma has not spoken to them in years as they have been unable to come to terms with her lesbianism. She describes her relationship with her only sibling, her sister, as being ‘close’ although they never mention her sexuality. Emma remains living in Canberra although she spends as much time as she can on the nearby South Coast of New South Wales. Exhausted by the politics of Women’s Services, Emma has once again returned to work in the Public Service.
Leigh (b. 1953)

1982 (age 29)
The first time I thought I was attracted to someone, was maybe in about 1982 when I was at uni ... I had actually seen lesbians the year before but I didn’t think much about it. I saw these two women and someone told me they were lesbians and I was a bit curious about that. And then, the next year in Women’s Studies I saw these two girls who were lesbians and thought that was interesting, and my other two friends ... said ‘Do you think that everybody is basically bisexual?’ and it had never occurred to me to think about that at all. I thought ‘Oh I don’t know, maybe!’ ... It wasn’t likely that being a lesbian would have occurred to me in my house in Melba. I needed a context for it to occur to me.

Leigh was born in Canberra’s neighbouring town, Queanbeyan, in 1953. Her family moved to Canberra shortly after her birth where they lived in the inner north. Leigh has lived in Canberra ever since. The second born of four, she was the only girl – a fact, she says, that was to greatly influence the direction of her life. Whilst her brothers were encouraged to complete Year 12, Leigh was not. She left school after Year 10 and went to secretarial college. In 1971, at age seventeen, Leigh married the boy she had been going steady with since she was twelve. In the early years of the marriage she worked in a secretarial pool in the Public Service while her husband established himself as a mechanic. By 1978 they had a home in the suburbs (Melba), two cars, a caravan down the south coast and three children. By all social and economic indicators they were a success story. And yet Leigh couldn’t accept that this was all there was to life. An affair with a neighbour helped her decide to explore other possibilities and soon thereafter she left the marriage and began an arduous but rewarding journey as the single mother of three. In the years that followed, among other things, she attended university as mature age student, enrolled in Women’s Studies, came into contact with Canberra’s flourishing lesbian (feminist) community, helped establish a women’s refuge, bought the house of her dreams, and became a grandmother.
Dee (b. 1953)

1972 (age 19)
When I was nineteen ... I can remember sitting in this house ... and Gail saying did I want to come to Sydney to meet these friends of hers who were lesbians ... and David ... the boy I married, saying 'You want to be careful Dee, you know, they'll try to get onto you' and so I was a bit afraid but also a bit fascinated. I had no idea what on earth all this was, or what it meant.

1976 (age 23)
After meeting those women in Sydney I didn’t think about lesbianism at all until David and my two kids, we went to live in Denmark ... I’d go swimming at this indoor pool ... and I can remember seeing this woman there, she was there every week and I was just fascinated by her. And I’d find myself wanting to go back to the pool just because she was there. She’d go and sit in the sauna and I’d go and sit in the sauna. It was a really strange thing. I just felt so attracted to this woman that I’d never seen before. I had no idea what her name was. I knew nothing about her. It was almost like this pull ... And every week I’d go to the pool and every week she’d be there. And I never did anything, I never even approached her or said hullo, just had this bit of a fantasy going on in my head.

Dee was born in Raymond Terrace, near Newcastle, NSW, in 1953. She was one of five children, four of whom were girls. Dee attended public co-ed schools and describes her home and school life as being very female-oriented. At seventeen, she finished high school, got married and had her first son. When her husband’s work some years later took him to Denmark, Dee and her two sons accompanied him. Two and a half years later the family returned to Australia and settled in Melbourne where Dee enrolled as a mature age student at the University of Melbourne. In 1980, when her husband was offered a job in Canberra, Dee was loathe to leave, but she did. When another overseas job offer came up in 1982, Dee decided not to go. As she saw her husband off at the airport she knew that the marriage was over. In 1983 she enrolled in Women’s Studies at the ANU and there her life took on a new direction. Being involved in feminist activities led Dee to find work in Women’s Services where she remained for many years before returning to university to study law part-time. She eventually qualified as a lawyer and soon after accepting a job interstate with a newly formed Aboriginal Women’s Legal Service.
Kate (b. 1955)

1969 (age 14)
When I was in high school there was this one girl, she was my friend, she was called Ann. I couldn’t decide if I was attracted to her or not, sometimes I was and sometimes I wasn’t, but I also had this feeling that she was going to be a lesbian. I don’t know if I would have used those words for it then, but I did have this feeling that’s what she was going to be anyway and there were times when I thought ‘Mmmm, wonder if I could be – you know, a lesbian too, like her.’

1974 (age 19)
When I was still in a relationship with Andrew and living in the group house ... there was this conference in Canberra and these two lesbians from Melbourne got billeted in our house. I remember sitting in the house looking at them going to and fro [to the conference] and thinking ‘Wow aren’t they lovely, aren’t they wonderful’ and I thought ‘Hmm, I wonder what that means that I think they’re so nice,’ and I thought, ‘Perhaps that means I am one.’

Kate was born, an only child, in Sydney in 1955. She grew up in Abbotsford and Turramurra and in 1973 moved to Canberra to attend university. She began an Arts degree in Asian Studies but ended up with an Honours degree in Philosophy. During her university years Kate became heavily involved in student politics – initially with the ANU Labor Club (Revolutionary Communists) and later with the ANU-based radical feminists. In 1974 she took part in the student takeover of the Vice Chancellor’s office; one of the demands of the protest was to establish Women’s Studies at the ANU. Kate says that her interest in political causes was initially sparked during her final two years at high school when she moved from the State system to an alternative hippie school. It was in that environment that she came to question the education system, got involved in anti-Vietnam demonstrations, and attended some early women’s liberation meetings. Finishing her university studies in 1977, Kate then joined the Public Service but also remained involved in various feminist collectives and activities. Some years later she resigned from the Public Service and went to work in Women’s Services. Kate still works in Women’s Services but now lives in Sydney with her current partner.
Jocelyn (b. 1960)

1967 (age 7)
I remember when I was about seven or eight, living in the Philippines. And I had this best best friend called Mary Gomez and she was just gorgeous ... I was accused of having a crush on her and I thought about it and I thought ‘If a crush is what I think it is, then yeah I do actually have a crush on her, I think she’s really good’ ... So this person accused me of this and I said ‘Yes, I do!’ And that was the last I heard of it! Mind you, Mary had decided that she wouldn’t talk to me anymore because I had a crush on her ... I was kind of sad, because I thought ‘Yeah, I’ve admitted to it, why isn’t she talking to me?’ You know, ‘I’ve confessed!’ So that was sort of the end of the friendship.

1975 (age 15)
Nearly always through my life I can remember having a very close girlfriend who was like my buddy who I’d spend my entire time with and that became a sexual thing in 4th form high school when I had this huge, huge crush on this girl – she was like the blonde surfer chick! She was completely inaccessible, so that was probably the safest person to be in lust with. And I thought she was just the most gorgeous thing ... I wanted to be with her physically and spend time with her and kiss her and do all those sorts of things. It was – even though I’d never ever, not in a million pink fits have acted on it – it was a sexual thing, but from a great distance.

Jocelyn was born in Newcastle, NSW in 1960. She is the second youngest of five children and has three sisters (two of whom are also lesbians) and one brother. When Jocelyn was three her family moved to Canberra where they lived for three years. Over the next six years Jocelyn lived, for varying amounts of time, in the Philippines, Thailand and Canberra. In 1972, following the family tradition, Jocelyn became a boarder at Canberra Girls Grammar School. After finishing sixth form, she went on to university where she got involved in student radio and feminist activities and was finally able to reconcile her feelings for women within a supportive social (and political) environment. She spent some time travelling in England and Europe and upon completion of her Arts degree began working in the art world and doing her own photography. She worked for many years as the curator of a successful art gallery in Canberra before taking a public art position in the ACT public service. She still occasionally finds the time to exhibit her own work.
The narrators: a cast of eight

Erin (b. 1961)

1974 (age 14)
I had been in love with, you know teachers at school ... I wasn’t one to talk about those sort of crushes anyway; hopeless passions, unattainable people ... I never felt badly about myself because I had crushes on female teachers.

1980 (age 19)
So how did I know I was a lesbian? It was in 1980 and I’d started university. I lived next door, in the uni residence, to this woman and she was unlike anybody I’d ever met ... I had the most strange few months. Really bizarre, I didn’t know where I was or what I was doing ... I went home one weekend and I just got into bed and cried and cried and cried ... And my mum finally said to me ‘What the hell is the matter with you?’ And we sat down and we started talking and I started talking about this woman. Her name was Toni. And I’m going on and on and on ... And my mum just sat forward in the chair and she looked at me and she said ‘You’re in love with her’. And I said ‘WHAT?!’ absolutely shocked.

Erin was born in Perth, Scotland in 1961. Being the youngest of three children by some twenty years meant that she was ostensibly brought up an only child. Her background she describes as ‘absolutely and totally working class’. Erin describes her father as a gut socialist who is very pro-union and pro-working class; and her mother, who is equally conscious of her class status but in a negative way, as a racist who could put Bruce Ruxton to shame. The living conditions of her first twelve years Erin describes as horrific and poverty-stricken; they lived, she says, in a typical working class slum. In 1973 Erin’s parents and she, leaving her brother and sister behind, emigrated to Australia in one of the last batches of assisted passage migrants. They settled immediately in Canberra where her father built their house in the new suburb of Melba in Belconnen. Erin marks emigrating to Australia as the most significant event of her life. She is sure she would never have finished high school if she'd stayed in Scotland. The different opportunities in Australia however, made it possible for her to become the first person in her family to attend university, to hold down a well-paid job, and to buy a house of her own.
Teresa (b. 1961)

1978 (age 17)
My sister, my mother and I went along to the Women & Labour Conference at Macquarie University in Sydney ... And there was this woman all dressed in lavender and purple, with beret and all the rest of it. VERY publicly a lesbian, one of the organisers of the conference. And I looked at her and I thought ‘She’s gorgeous’. I thought ‘She’s a lesbian, I think she’s gorgeous, I’m attracted to her, I’m a lesbian’. And that’s when I took that word. It wasn’t the first time I wanted to be sexual with women, that I was attracted to women and all that. But it was the first time I thought ... ‘that’s the word to describe me.’ And that was really important, because while I didn’t act on that, I didn’t have a lesbian relationship until years later, I knew that I would. It was just a matter of time.

Teresa, the youngest of two girls, was born in Canberra in 1961 and apart from the years 1964–67, when her family lived in England, it is where she grew up. In 1967 her family were among the first 100 households to move into Belconnen. They lived in a quiet cul-de-sac in a friendly, close-knit neighbourhood. In 1978 Teresa was among one of the first groups of students to take Canberra’s first secondary school Women’s Studies course at Hawker College. As both her mother and sister were active feminists much of the course content was not surprising to her. However, while she was aware of women’s liberation and, to a lesser degree, gay liberation, the idea of radical lesbian feminism was completely new to her and was to have a lasting impact. After completing Year 12, Teresa moved to Melbourne to go to university. She later returned to Canberra, where she taught for many years at the junior college she herself had attended, before joining the Public Service. A work transfer some years later saw Teresa leave Canberra once again, this time permanently.
PART I

HISTORIOGRAPHY, METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT
Chapter One

Historiography and methodology

In my quest to write a history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra, in order to get past the sense of isolation that came from ‘choosing an area of research for which there was no context, no literature, no definition of issues, and no sources that had ever been tapped’¹, I found it necessary to explore a number of unfamiliar fields to locate a methodological approach appropriate for my project. One of a limited generation for whom a degree in Women’s Studies was possible, I came to graduate work with a broad-based feminist background and no specific disciplinary skills or knowledge.² I was neither historian nor anthropologist; ethnographer nor sociologist; I was a lesbian (feminist) in search of the lesbian past in Australia. In a sense, being discipline-less has complicated my task. Not only have I had to research and write this history, I have had to research how to research and write it. In addition to that, having chosen to incorporate the challenges of interviewing into my work, I have had to learn a particular way of doing history that turned out to be anything but straightforward. In coming to terms with this ethical minefield, in addition to reading a broad range of lesbian and gay histories, I found it necessary to consult literature on feminist methodology, gay and lesbian anthropology, sociology and oral history. In this


² A conversation I had with an established feminist academic during my undergraduate years comes back to haunt me these days: she predicted back then in the 1980s that in the years to come, not having a discipline to ground one’s research in would prove to be problematic for those of us who held Women’s Studies degrees. Her argument was that we would find ourselves without a home, in a permanent state of flux, unable to attach ourselves anywhere easily. At the time I disagreed vehemently with her – admittedly I never saw myself going on to do graduate work – but now, some ten years down the track, I am more than willing to concede that she had a valid point.
chapter, I open with a review of literature relevant to my project before exploring in some depth the issues involved in writing lesbian history in Australia. Here, based on the methodological literature consulted, I outline the approach I developed for this history.

Review of literature

In 1972, in one of the first books ever to portray lesbians positively, lesbian authors Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love made the following observation: 'The Lesbian is one of the least known members of our culture. Less is known about her – and less accurately – than about the Newfoundland dog'. In the three decades since then, although the lack of information as noted by Abbott and Love is no longer evident, there still remain significant geographical and historical gaps in the gay and lesbian record. Although an extensive library of gay and lesbian literature now exists, most of it has been produced by and about America; of that only a small percentage is historically focused; and of that, only a small percentage is about women. This is not to say that outside of America nothing ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ has seen publication, for that is certainly not the case. I am suggesting, however, that on a global level gay and lesbian history needs to be more representative: the geographical focus of gay and lesbian histories needs to be expanded to include more about those living outside America; and the gendered focus of gay and lesbian history needs to be expanded to include more about women.

In the following review of literature I attempt to provide an historiographic map in which it is possible to locate this history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra, Australia, 1965-84. As ‘She Gave Me That Look’ aims to contribute to feminist history as well as the field of lesbian and gay history, this review of literature needs to incorporate a variety of texts that are rarely brought together. In order to present a coherent and linear historiography of this disparate collection of publications I have chosen to divide the relevant literature into the following somewhat disingenuous

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3 This is not to deny the existence of other positive portrayals of lesbian love in Australia, as in Lesbia Harford’s poetry for example (or Sappho’s), but rather to make the point that Abbott and Love’s book is written expressly with the intent of disavowing the negative myths surrounding lesbianism rather than primarily being a celebration of lesbian love (not necessarily intended for public viewing). For further material about Lesbia Harford’s poetry see Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer (eds), The Poems of Lesbia Harford, Sirius Books, Sydney, 1985.

categories: homosexual and lesbian histories; feminist histories; and gay liberation histories. Under homosexual and lesbian histories I include histories – regardless of when they were published – that focus on homosexual and lesbian experiences prior to the inception of gay and women’s liberation in the late 1960s. Under feminist histories I include those that document second wave feminism as it came to exist via the Women’s Liberation Movement. And similarly, under gay liberation histories I include those that seek to record and explain the Gay Liberation Movement. I have further separated out Australian-based histories with the intention of providing a geographically specific context.

Homosexual and lesbian histories

In the English-speaking west, prior to the advent of gay and women’s liberation an inordinately small number of histories of homosexuality existed – only two, in fact: Derrick Sherwin Bailey’s 1955 *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* and Noele Garde’s 1964 *Jonathon to Gide: The Homosexual in History.* In the period preceding gay liberation, books on homosexuality did see publication but tended to offer an explanation or defence of it. Books like Donald Webster Cory’s *The Homosexual in America* (1951) and Jess Stearn’s *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian* (1965) may well be of historic value today but at the time of publication they existed as part of a small field concerned with homosexuality in a contemporary sense – this genre focused more on male homosexuality than lesbianism.

Historically speaking, the gender placement of lesbians as women in a patriarchal economy, has meant that male homosexuality has generally received more attention than its female equivalent, albeit often negatively. Not surprisingly, this inequity is

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reflected in the focus of those histories of homosexuality that do exist. This male bias can be attributed to a number of seemingly tangential things. The legal persecution of gay men and the long struggle to decriminalise male homosexuality, for example, has resulted in gay men’s lives being better documented than those of lesbians.7 As Australian researcher Robert French maintains, ‘Without legal restrictions generally placed upon their sexual activity, lesbians don’t often make it into the official record’.8 In addition to being largely absent from official legal records9, lesbians are also poorly represented in the print media, which until the advent of gay liberation in the late 1960s, consisted mostly of sensationalised reports of male homosexual arrests and

7 The legal persecution of male homosexuals still continues in the west and beyond. In 1993 the following countries listed male homosexual behaviour as a specific criminal offence (rather than something that can be considered grounds for prosecution under the guise of being in defiance of societal morals etc): Algeria, Angola, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Bermuda, Bhutan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Chile, Cook Islands, Cuba, Cyprus, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Fiji Islands, Georgia, Ghana, Guyana, India, Iran, Ireland, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritania, Mauritius, Moldova, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Niue, Oman, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Romania, Russia, Saint Lucia, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Seychelles, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Western Samoa, Yemen, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe. This listing does not necessarily include countries where homosexual age of consent legislation exists, nor does it include countries where homosexuality is a criminal offence in the military, both of which would make this a much longer list. My suggestion that the legal persecution of male homosexuals has led to there being more documentary evidence of a gay male past should not be taken to mean that there has not been a history of lesbian legal persecution, but rather that, comparatively speaking, the legal persecution of gay men has been far more widespread. A number of countries do, in fact, explicitly prosecute on the grounds of lesbianism, they include: Afghanistan, Algeria, the Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Burkina Faso, Cuba, Ethiopia, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Liechtenstein, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritania, Morocco, Nicaragua, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sudan, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Western Samoa and Yemen. This list does not include countries where it is illegal for lesbian groups and organisations to exist despite lesbian (sexual) behaviour not being illegal, as for example is the case in Chile; it is based solely on the legal situation of lesbians with regards sexual behaviour. Nor does it list countries where lesbians are detained by other legal means as is the case in Argentina where lesbians are commonly arrested under the same charge as sex workers are, the ‘incitement to commit a carnal act in the public street’. See Alejandra Sarda, ‘Argentina’ in Rachel Rosenbloom (ed.), Unspoken Rules. Sexual Orientation and Women’s Human Rights, Cassell, London, 1996, p.3. See also Louis Crompton, ‘The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791’ in Salvatore J. Licata and Robert P. Peterson (eds), The Gay Past: A Collection of Historical Essays, Harrington Park Press, New York, 1985. Please note that the above lists were compiled from information available in the mid 1990s, and may have altered slightly since then. These changes are unlikely to be significant however because of how slow to fruition changes in the law are when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. See Rob Tielman and Hans Hambelburg’s comprehensive ‘World Survey on the Social and Legal Position of Gays and Lesbians’ in Aart Hendriks, Rob Tielman and Evert van der Veen (eds), The Third Pink Book: A Global View of Lesbian and Gay Liberation and Oppression, Prometheus Books, New York, 1993; Monika Reinfelder (ed.), Amazon to Zami: Towards a Global Lesbian Feminism, Cassell, London, 1996.


9 For further discussion about the absence of lesbians in history see Blanche Wiesen Cook, ‘The Historical Denial of Lesbianism’, Radical History Review, No. 20, Spring/Summer, 1979, pp. 60-5.
court cases. Lynne Friedli’s description of the treatment of homosexuals and passing women in eighteenth-century England emphasises just how ingrained this problematic tradition is:

Sexual relations between women rarely attracted the attention of the courts, and neither women who merely dressed as men, nor those who married [other women], were the focus of public disapproval in the way that Molly Clubs and effeminate men were.

The long tradition of public disapproval and the wealth of primary sources pertaining to male homosexuality has undoubtedly made it easier to embark on the challenging and complicated task of documenting a continuous gay (male) history. As Robert French, writing about the situation in Australia, says:

References to lesbians or to women having sex with other women appear infrequently in the official archives ... One obvious factor is the non-illegality of their sexual activity which kept them from the reach of the law enforcers, whose records have provided gay researchers with a treasure trove of material.

Additionally, because gay men in the west, by virtue of their gender privilege as men, have tended to have better access than lesbians to financial and structural resources, they have been in a better position to embark upon research about themselves and those they perceive to be their predecessors. Or as Rictor Norton suggests: ‘... the gay male subculture is more visible and more extensive because men earn more money, act more independently from family life and have more freedom of movement than women’.

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10 See, for example, Wayne Murdoch, “‘Disgusting Doings’ and ‘Putrid Practices’: Reporting Homosexual Men’s Lives in the Melbourne Truth During the First World War’ in Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon (eds), Gay and Lesbian Perspectives IV: Studies in Australian Culture, Department of Economic History and the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1998.


12 French, Camping by a Billabong, p. 13. As French further notes, whilst there are undoubtedly many advantages to having this ‘treasure trove of material’, one of the potential disadvantages lies in the fact that such material reflects only the situation of those who came into contact with the law – those ‘who escaped official detection and managed to live reasonably fulfilling lives together’ (p. 20) remain lost to the past.

The majority of homosexual and lesbian histories published in the three decades since 1970 have had a male focus. Lesbian history, as a separate genre, has been slow to emerge. There are to date, only two broad-based book length lesbian histories of the twentieth-century, both of which were published in the 1990s. Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, first published in 1991, tells the story of lesbian life in twentieth-century America. And a full five years later, in 1996, Emily Hamer’s British equivalent *Britannia’s Glory: A History of Twentieth Century Lesbianism* saw publication. As the twentieth-century drew to a close, Australia had yet to produce a broad-based history of lesbian life specific to its shores. Other book length lesbian histories of varying time periods include: Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*; Emma Donaghue’s *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*; Trisha Franzen’s *Spinsters and Lesbians. Independent Womanhood in the United States*; and Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis’ *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold. The History of a Lesbian Community*. The publication of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* in 1993 marked the beginning of a trend in lesbian historiography towards more localised

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histories. Compared to their male equivalents, there are spectacularly few lesbian histories published as either edited collections or articles and chapters. A number of other books, whilst not strictly falling into the lesbian history genre, do contain substantial historical material pertaining to lesbian experiences and are invaluable to the lesbian historian. Additionally, in the context of the recent past, and perhaps as a reaction against the place occupied by lesbians in feminist and gay communities, as well as the larger community, much has been written about lesbians by lesbians. And whilst most of this literature falls into categories outside of ‘history’ it is nonetheless an invaluable resource for those engaged in researching and writing lesbian history. The broad body of lesbian literature published over the last thirty years now outweighs that of its gay male counterpart, perhaps the result of occupying the periphery in so many arenas. There are literally thousands of articles, chapters and books with lesbian content – fiction, theoretical, autobiographical, biographical, political, personal, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, linguistic, theological – which are useful to historians engaged in lesbian research. The ways in which elements of this body of literature affected the experiences of the eight narrators included in this history are discussed in later chapters.


Unlike recent debate around second wave feminism and the question of who should be writing its histories, there has been little speculation as to why there are so few lesbian histories of the past, recent or otherwise. There is, however, a growing body of literature concerned with the difficulties inherent in ‘doing’ lesbian history. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis have published many articles on the methodological dilemmas they encountered in researching and writing *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Similarly Esther Newton has written of some of the unexpected complications she ran into whilst researching and writing her history of Cherry Grove. Further discussion of methodological issues as they pertain to lesbian history can be found later in this chapter.

A small number of homosexual histories pertaining to both men and women do exist but they tend not to devote equal amounts of space to lesbian and gay content. This is explained on the one hand by the absence of sources and on the other by the interests of their authors – usually male. As Rictor Norton describes it:

> References to lesbianism throughout history are so sparse ... it is difficult to incorporate them into any large overview of queer history without them being overwhelmed by the references to gay men’s history ... [That] [l]esbian history is usually presented as an appendix to gay history ... may be an inevitable consequence for the premodern period due to the paucity of material.

Or as Charles Kaiser admits of his attempt to write an equally represented lesbian and gay history of New York city: ‘While the women I have written about are among the

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24 See Ion, ‘Unravelling our Past’.


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most compelling characters in this saga, men gradually became my principal focus - because their story is also mine'.

The anthologies *The Gay Past: A Collection of Historical Essays* and *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* provide us with two collections where a disproportionate representation of gay to lesbian histories does not occur - this perhaps being an easier task to achieve in the anthology format. The 'add lesbians and stir' method of writing gay and lesbian history may be a necessary step in getting lesbians' stories heard or 'an inevitable consequence for the premodern period' but needs always to be acknowledged and treated with caution. If history is what we make it, a subjective enterprise rather than that which exists independently of the historian, we need to remain vigilant about the perspectives we choose to prioritise and make explicit why we have chosen to prioritise them.

**Feminist histories**

A situation not dissimilar to that of lesbians in the field of gay and lesbian history can be found in feminist histories of the recent past where they tend to exist on the periphery. Whilst the difficulties experienced by lesbians in the women's movement in the west have been well documented and commented upon since the late 1960s, as yet the full extent of their involvement and contribution to second wave feminism remains largely unexplored. In spite of the high percentage of lesbians involved, the few

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Histories so far written of the recent feminist past treat sexuality as a separate and distinct aspect of the struggle for women’s equality rather than as a central organising component of the movement. It is, however, worth noting that a few attempts to address the silence around sexuality were made by feminists in the 1980s. In 1984 Australian lesbian, Helen Pausacker, in her article ‘Tell Me a Story about Lesbians Fucking’ warned of the dangers inherent in sweeping ‘sex under the carpet’:

The mixed gay and lesbian-feminist movements have cleared up a lot of ‘dirt’ from the words gay and lesbian. We have, over the 70’s, come out, and said we’re ‘gay, lesbian and proud’. We have taken a political stance ... but have we in the process just swept sex under the carpet? We seem to have found no way of recording the erotic alongside the political analysis ... We have come out to the heterosexual world as lesbians. I feel what we need to do now is to come out to ourselves and each other about what we do or want to do in bed.

The sex issue was taken up and heatedly debated by significant numbers of feminist lesbians in the 1980s, and yet, in writing the histories of the recent feminist past, the importance of sex, separate to it being ‘a feminist issue’, has been left out of the equation. In the same way that class, race and ethnicity have tended to be treated as problematic movement issues, histories of second wave feminism have cast lesbian


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sexuality in a similar light, refusing to engage with it as a crucial motivating and highly influential factor for the women involved. Gisela Kaplan, for example, in *The Meagre Harvest: The Australian Women’s Movement 1950s-1990s*, the first monograph to document second wave feminism in Australia, relegates lesbian issues to one chapter titled ‘Sappho’s new sisters’. And Marilyn Lake’s *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, whilst admittedly covering a substantially longer period than Kaplan’s history, addresses lesbian experiences in the women’s movement in Australia in little more than six pages. In both these instances, the ‘lavender menace’ incidents of the early-to-mid-1970s – when lesbian oppression made it onto the feminist agenda for the first time in Australia – are assumed to adequately represent the lesbian experience of feminism. The sexualised experiences of lesbian feminists as active participants in all aspects of the movement remain unspoken, unacknowledged and unexplored. Why was it, for example, that lesbians were so active in contraception and pro-abortion campaigns? Was their concern purely altruistic or was there a sexual agenda in play? Is it conceivable that some women became involved, or remained involved for extended periods, with these apparently heterosexually focused campaigns, partially – or perhaps even primarily – in order to meet sexual partners or to explore same-sex desire in a seemingly supportive environment? In this context Gary Dowsett’s urging to make sex explicit in history seems fitting. He writes:

... in the political histories of Gay Liberation there is little evidence of sex going on. It is as if gay men (and lesbians for that matter) did little else but attend meetings,

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35 Kaplan, *The Meagre Harvest*, pp. 91-121.


37 The term ‘lavender menace’ is derived from a lesbian-initiated action in America in 1970 when members of the Gay Liberation Front took over a feminist convention by storming the stage wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the words LAVENDER MENACE. Since then the term has been used as a shorthand means of referring to the time/s when lesbianism reared its head as a movement issue.
rallies and demonstrations, and write political and theoretical tracts. In fact, there was a lot of fucking going on, and it is important to say so.38

Dowsett's observation that sex has been overlooked as an important aspect in histories of gay liberation can easily be applied to the histories thus far told of women's liberation.

**Gay liberation histories**

Dowsett's criticism notwithstanding, histories of the Gay Liberation Movement do generally provide an exception to the gender-bias of homosexual histories as well as avoiding the dearth of lesbian content apparent in feminist histories. Undoubtedly a testament to the political agenda of the period, a number of book length histories of gay liberation, which address equally the experiences of lesbians and gay men in the movement, have been published – until very recently, however, they have all been about America. Leading the way in 1983 was John D'Emilio’s groundbreaking book, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; it was followed in 1987 by Barry Adam’s *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*; in 1992 by Margaret Cruikshank’s *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*; in 1993 by Eric Marcus’ *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights 1945-1990. An Oral History*; and in 1994 by Martin Duberman’s *Stonewall*.39 And in Australia it was not until 1999 and 2000 that similar histories were published (see following section). There are no equivalent histories about the movement in Britain although a number of relevant anthologies do exist, like Aubrey Walter’s *Come Together: The Years of Gay Liberation 1970-1973* (1980); Cant and Hemming’s *Radical Records: Thirty Years of Lesbian and Gay History, 1957-1987* (1988); and Healey and Mason’s *Stonewall 25: The Making of the Lesbian and Gay Community in Britain* (1994).40


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Australian-based histories

In Australia it has only been in very recent years that Craig Johnston’s *A Sydney Gaze: The Making of Gay Liberation* (1999) and Graham Willett’s *Living out Loud. A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia* (2000) have seen publication. In monograph form there are no lesbian histories and only a handful of male homosexual histories including: Dino Hodge’s *Did You Meet Any Malagas? A Homosexual History of Australia’s Tropical Capital* (1993); Garry Wotherspoon’s *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-Culture* (1991). Anthologies are similarly scarce and include: Garry Wotherspoon’s *Being Different: Nine Gay Men Remember* (1986); Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling’s *Words from the Same Heart* (1987); and Robert French’s *Camping By A Billabong: Gay and Lesbian Stories from Australian History* (1993). Since the mid 1980s, whilst a significant number of articles and chapters on male homosexuality in Australia have appeared, they have been authored by only a few – dominant names in the field being Garry Wotherspoon, Robert Aldrich, Robert French, Clive Moore and Graham Willett. The articles included in the *Gay (& Lesbian) Perspectives* series, published since 1992, despite the belated addition of ‘lesbian’ to the title in volume 3, are predominantly focused on male homosexuality. It has only been since the mid-to-late 1990s that a number of articles and chapters on lesbian history have also seen publication; although significantly less in number than those on male homosexuality, the lesbian field is also authored by only a few, Ruth Ford being its leading voice.

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Ruth Ford has done the most extensive historical research about lesbians in Australia thus far. Her work covers the period 1918-1960. Whilst Ford’s work does at times claim a national perspective, her research tends to focus primarily on same sex desire as it was played out in and around Melbourne. Lucy Chesser’s research takes up on either side of Ford’s, her recently completed PhD thesis covering the period, 1850-1920, and her honours thesis, 1960-69. Whilst Chesser’s early research on lesbian identities focuses specifically on Melbourne, her more recent work on the lives of cross dressers covers Australia more generally. A list of Australian-based lesbian histories (including those about female cross dressers) is included in Appendix D.

Writing lesbian history in Australia

Although there remains much to be done to create a full record of the lesbian and gay past in Australia, much can be gained from studying American lesbian and gay histories with regard to content and methodology. These histories offer us a place from which to begin research. The historical chain of events that occurred in America is undoubtedly relevant to Australia and needs to be acknowledged as such. As Dennis Altman argues, we have grown up ‘with America’s myths about itself’ and ‘because of the apparent resemblances’ have applied them ‘unthinkingly to ourselves’. The Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 and the supposedly subsequent emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement in America are far more likely to figure in our


understanding of the gay and lesbian past than the Australasian Lesbian Movement (ALM) and Canberra's Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS), both of which also existed in 1969. Similarly, the year the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses is repeatedly cited in gay and lesbian literature both inside and outside America, despite the equivalent Australian and New Zealand organisation having done so two months prior to the US. In writing our own histories, we need to explore the impact of American events, whilst being careful that we don't import wholesale America's gay and lesbian past.

Figure 4 Australian Lesbian Calendar, 1977.

It is likely that it will be years before we can hope for any substantive analyses of the Australian lesbian and gay past as even a semi-autonomous national entity. To attempt to do a comprehensive twentieth-century history of lesbian life in Australia similar to the one Lillian Faderman has compiled of the American tradition, currently verges on the impossible. There are not enough readily available secondary or primary sources. We need to better organise our resources in more accessible archives and libraries. We need to hear and record the different stories of indigenous lesbians, Anglo/Celtic lesbians, ethnic lesbians, working-class and middle-class lesbians, rich and poor lesbians, disabled lesbians, butch lesbians, femme lesbians, transgendered

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47 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers.
lesbians, feminist lesbians, Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, and Jewish lesbians. 48 We need to continue documenting the lives of passing women and questioning whether they are part of a lesbian history. 49 We need to consider the position of convict women who engaged in same sex relationships 50; of married women who engage(d) in same sex relationships both with and without the consent of their husbands. 51

In the interests of creating histories with the potential to represent a broad spectrum of lesbian life experiences in Australia, in addition to what we can learn contextually from our American counterparts, we can also benefit from the varied methodological approaches they have employed in their gay and lesbian histories. In the following section, I outline the three methodological approaches utilised by John D’Emilio, Lillian Faderman, and Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, in their histories and discuss the ways in which they may be useful in the production of Australian histories and in this history in particular. I have chosen to evaluate these three texts because they are pivotal to the tradition of lesbian and gay history in which ‘She Gave Me That Look’ is partially located. That all three are American is not mere coincidence but rather an indication of the geographical bias of key lesbian and gay histories thus far published.


50 Robert French, ‘And So To Bed’ in Camping By a Billabong.

Lesbian and gay history: three American approaches

[H]e also set consistently high standards for historical work and, without ever asking me to abandon my point of view, insisted that I use the persuasion of evidence carefully marshaled, rather than rhetoric carelessly employed to make my argument.

John D'Emilio

Through my research methodology I hoped to be inclusive of the broadest spectrum of lesbian life, past and present. For the sections of this book dealing with the previous century or the earliest decades of this century obviously I had to rely on archives, journals, and other published materials to reconstruct the history of lesbian life in America.

Lillian Faderman

In our research and writing, we experiment with constructing a detailed community history using oral-history narratives as the primary source ... We aim in research, analysis, and writing to find the appropriate balance between recognizing that our results are constructed ... while offering them as part of the historical record about the lesbian community of the 1940s and 1950s ... we experiment with interweaving the narrators' voices and our own ... The end result aims to create ... a dialogue between the narrators' reflections and interpretations of their lives, and our own desire to find the best way to understand lesbian history.

Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis

Figure 5 Book covers.

John D'Emilio's Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities. The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970, Lillian Faderman's Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America, and Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis' Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold. The History of a Lesbian Community have all made valuable contributions to the field of lesbian and gay history as it has evolved since the 1980s. These texts have become pivotal in the field in terms of content and approach. D'Emilio's 1983 history not only provides an extensive

52 D'Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, p. ix.
53 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 7.
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analysis of the homophile movement as it existed in the three decades prior to the inception of gay liberation, it also convincingly argues that these movements provided the impetus for the Gay Liberation Movement to emerge when and in the manner it did. Faderman's 1992 history is the first book length history of lesbians in America. It is the first national history of lesbianism to span the twentieth-century, certainly in the English-speaking west. In her history of lesbian life Faderman shows that there have always been 'women who prefer women' lurking in the margins of twentieth-century America, but she is also quick to explain that this does not equate to 'the Lesbian' always having existed. Such an assumption denies the diverse history beyond the term itself. According to Faderman, the only constant truth about 'the Lesbian in America' is that 'she prefers women'. 55 Kennedy and Davis' ethno-history of a working class bar culture in Buffalo, New York, is the first book length study of a mid-twentieth-century lesbian bar community in America; and the first historical study of lesbians to utilise both ethnography and history in its methodology. It builds on the new tradition of recent lesbian history as begun by Faderman, as well as furthering the position elucidated by D'Emilio in 1983, by documenting the influence of a pre-political lesbian sub-culture on the 'homophile, gay liberation, and lesbian feminist movements' that were to follow.

Aside from brief mentions in his acknowledgments section, D'Emilio does not explicitly discuss the methodological framework he utilised in Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities. Kennedy and Davis on the other hand, view methodology as equally important to content. They describe their research as an ethno-history which draws on the tradition of anthropology as a means by which to understand lesbian culture on its own terms, apart from the larger society. 57 Kennedy and Davis are indebted to the many lesbian and gay texts and archives in America, but unlike D'Emilio and Faderman, they have chosen to rely on oral history narratives as their primary source. The oral history methodology Kennedy and Davis employ has two goals: the first is simply to collect individual life stories, and the second is to use these life stories as a basis for re-constructing the social structure and culture of the lesbian community in Buffalo. Kennedy and Davis admit that using this method was complicated, difficult and often contradictory, and yet they believe the struggle to overcome these difficulties is a necessary and important one. Their research began as, and remained, a

55 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 308.
56 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p. 3.
57 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p. 11.
commitment to write a community history based on oral histories: ‘to create from individual memories a useful analysis of this community’s social life’. It was largely through trial and error that they eventually achieved their goals. In the process they became clear about what they needed to get from the oral histories in order to be able to fully achieve the second part of their goal. They had to be sure that the narrators gave them comparable information about community life in Buffalo and they had to ensure a good cross section of interviewees. Kennedy and Davis were then able to proceed finally with the complex task of juxtaposing all of the interviews with one another to try to identify patterns and contradictions.

Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, published in 1992 represents a bridging point between the methodological approaches utilised by Kennedy and Davis in 1993 and D’Emilio in 1983; between a contemporary climate that demands that methodology exist as an explicit and integral part of the history writing process; and an earlier time when the newness of reclamation history meant that content was deemed more important than how the material was collected, interpreted and presented. Faderman includes a thorough discussion on methodology in her book but it appears as an appendix rather than an introductory chapter as in the case of Kennedy and Davis. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, although Faderman draws on a variety of primary sources, including personal interviews, songs, newspapers, unpublished manuscripts, letters and archival material, their combined bulk does not constitute the basis of her work. More so than D’Emilio, or Kennedy and Davis, Faderman relies on research already published on lesbianism and homosexuality over the last century.

The oral history methodology Faderman utilised in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* was less complex than that of Kennedy and Davis although she conducted more interviews than they did. Faderman conducted one hundred and eighty-six unstructured interviews with lesbians of an assortment of ages, races and classes. The only prerequisite she required of her interviewees was that they be self-identified lesbians in keeping with her definition of post-1920s lesbianism: ‘you are a lesbian if you say (at least to yourself) that you are’. Whereas Kennedy and Davis chose to create their history from the patterns of similarity and contradiction that emerged via the juxtaposition of the narrators’ stories, Faderman, like D’Emilio, used the information from her interviews as evidence to support a semi-formulated version of the lesbian

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past rather than to problematise it. She does not use her interview information, like Kennedy and Davis do, to reexamine her ‘original hunches’ in order to develop ‘new or more precise interpretive frameworks’.60

D’Emilio’s history, like Faderman’s, draws on a variety of primary and secondary sources: he relies heavily on texts, journal articles, letters, archival documents, flyers, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, periodicals and newsletters, and also refers to popular fiction, literature, film and theatre (including censorship laws) as well as the transcripts of a number of relevant court cases. D’Emilio also includes excerpts from interviews he has conducted in both formal interview situations and informal conversations. As part of his overall history, D’Emilio relates the experiences of various key figures in the homophile movement. These stories are typically reliant on some form of direct contact between D’Emilio and the person in question (and her or his friends), and as such, qualify in some sense as oral history. D’Emilio’s tendency to focus on the experiences of key figures provides crucial information about the past but carries the unfortunate consequence of prioritising some experiences over others. It unintentionally allows the highly visible voices of some to become the voice of ‘truth’. How accurate and representative is a version of the past that tells only the stories of a prominent few who have remained contactable? From a contemporary perspective, it is important to revisit these early histories to search out the stories of those who remain in the shadows.

Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, like Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, is not ultimately an oral history and, therefore, should not be criticised for failing to grapple with the complex issues inherent in oral history methodology. D’Emilio uses the interviews he conducted as one more source to include in his carefully marshalled evidence. He does not, like Kennedy and Davis, make a conscious attempt to prioritise oral narratives, nor does he try to draw knowledge or ‘truth’ from each individual conversation. Unlike the messy but rewarding method of oral history employed by Kennedy and Davis, D’Emilio does not allow the data to sing ‘revealing deep cultural resonances and elegant themes’.61 D’Emilio acknowledges that he began his research with a particular point of view and that he used ‘carefully marshalled evidence’ to ‘make his argument’.62 In this respect, D’Emilio’s approach, like Faderman’s, differs from that of Kennedy and Davis, who elaborate at length on how their project had to be

60 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p. 21.
61 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p. 22.
62 D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, p. ix.
continually reassessed as the information they received from narrators conflicted with their preconceived ideas about the history they were writing. Despite the difficulties Kennedy and Davis faced in writing *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, they maintain that oral history is 'an invaluable method for documenting the experience of the invisible; it allows the narrators to speak in their own voices of their lives, loves and struggles'. The narrators' stories are given a primary place in the book and their words are minimally edited. The end result, say Kennedy and Davis, is aimed at creating for the reader 'a dialogue between the narrators’ reflections and interpretations of their lives, and our own desire to find the best way to understand lesbian history’. Despite my obvious interest in the unusual approach of Kennedy and Davis, my intention in this section has not been to praise their work and criticise D'Emilio and Faderman's but rather to indicate how different approaches to lesbian and gay history have evolved.

**Outlining the methodological approach of this history**

'**She Gave Me That Look**' has been influenced by all of the histories discussed in this chapter; as a local history, it acknowledges its geographical location in relation to the dominant American liberation movement narrative and builds on the general and specialised knowledge of those gay, lesbian and feminist histories already published. It has also been influenced by an eclectic selection of literature about methodology including Kennedy and Davis's innovative *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. In this section I discuss relevant aspects of this literature in relation to my experience of conducting, transcribing and interpreting interviews. This process proved to be painstakingly slow when not long into the project, I discovered interviewing was not as straightforward as I had envisaged.

To recapitulate, I conducted the interviews in 1994 with eight women who identified as lesbians and who were part of the lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra. The length of the interviews ranged from one and a half to three hours. Each of the women had lived as self-identified 'lesbians' (including those who identified variously as 'gay', 'camp', or 'dyke') in Canberra for some portion of the 1965-84 period. They were variously women I was friends with; had been lovers with; or was acquainted with in

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65 Kennedy and Davis suggest that 'between five and ten narrators' stories need to be juxtaposed in order to develop an analysis that is not changed dramatically by each new story'. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, p. 23.
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some other way. They in turn knew each other as lovers, friends, acquaintances, or in some instances only vaguely by name. Whilst they all, at one time or another, had belonged to Canberra's lesbian (feminist) community, this did not necessarily equate with how long they had identified as lesbians - as one of the narrators, Teresa, noted: 'You may find some people might come out, and come out in that very public sense, but you'll probably find ... people like myself ... and others, who came out well before they actually are doing those [public] things'.66 The inclusion of narrators who came out publicly as lesbians some time after they had first explored their attraction to other women or girls in a sense broadens this history. It allows the inclusion of same-sex childhood and adolescent experiences that have since been incorporated into the narrator’s lesbian identity but which at the time did not equate with them identifying as lesbian (see Chapter Five).

The significant markers in each of the narrator's lives, as expressed by them at the time of the interview in 1994, are noted in the following categories: education; work/career; marital and motherhood status. Six of the eight women have university educations: three returned to study later in life while three went straight to university from school. At one time or another: five have held Public Service jobs (ranging from one year to twenty five years); six have worked in or been involved with Women's Services. Between them they have done paid work either part-time or full-time on a casual, temporary or permanent basis as: secondary teacher, bar worker, educator/trainer, disc jockey, photographer, laboratory assistant, community worker, refuge worker, shift worker, typist, secretary, counsellor, paralegal, trade unionist, art curator, waitress, administrator, printer, tutor, university lecturer, screen printer, shop assistant. Three have been married (all getting married in their teenage years), two have children, and one is a grandmother. The marriages lasted between three and eight years. Both women who are mothers come from working class backgrounds and both married at seventeen; one has two children, the other three. None of the narrators indicated that organised religion had played a pivotal role in their upbringing.67

As not all of the women were comfortable with using their own names for the purposes of this research, and because using a combination of pseudonyms and real names would serve to make some of the women who wished to remain anonymous identifiable, I have chosen to use pseudonyms consistently for all eight women as well


67 The absence of religion in the eight narrators stories is not as unusual as it would be in America because Australia is a far more secular society.
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as for any identifiable people they refer to throughout the interviews. In instances where the women refer to another of the women being interviewed pseudonyms are used consistently to maintain and reflect a sense of community. For example where Jocelyn names one of the other women interviewed as a key figure in her own coming out story I have used that woman’s pseudonym – Erin – to refer to her. Wherever possible pseudonyms have not been used for figures and/or groups whose names appear in public documents of the period. Workplaces and specific feminist organisations narrators may have been involved with have however been left deliberately obscure. In general, identifying features have been omitted or left vague rather than completely altered although birthplaces have not been changed.

Photographs of narrators have not been included. All other photographs appear with permission or have already been published elsewhere. They are intended to complement the written word by providing a visual sense of place and community. It is a sad reflection of the times that it still remains necessary to ‘protect’ the identity of lesbians (and homosexuals) in the histories we create for ourselves. It would seem that the fear of repercussion, harassment and persecution are never entirely absent from our lives, even for those of us who have lived relatively openly as lesbians. The subjective anonymity of the narrators in this history acts as a sign of respect towards the eight women who felt able to share their stories. It also serves to indicate that the fight for lesbian (and gay) rights, equality and justice, is not yet over.

As mentioned elsewhere, the starting point of this history was the stories told by the eight women. That said, however, I do acknowledge that the information the women volunteered during the interviews was in response to a set of questions formulated by me; the information received was not entirely random and the resulting history, therefore, cannot avoid being a construction of the author in some sense. Working out how to create a coherent history based on those narratives has been a complex task. Following the example of Kennedy and Davis, I chose to create my context initially from information gleaned in the interviews and then treated the narratives as one source amongst many from which to marshall evidence. ‘She Gave Me That Look’ does not claim to be the definitive history of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community but rather a version of that past as it was experienced by eight women and whose ‘ordinary’ experiences are likely to be representative of many other women who came out into a similar environment at a similar time.

The narratives of the women interviewed have not been altered in any way and as a result are occasionally a little repetitive, or hesitant as indicated by pauses. In general these moments can be read as the narrator’s desire to communicate her point clearly. Inspired by Kennedy and Davis’ technique of including ‘extended quotations’ from the oral history narratives to ‘convey the courage, dignity, and pain of individuals’
lives, as well as the perspectives, concepts, language, and the texture of lesbian community and culture’, I have relied on a similar format when presenting the narratives in this history, especially in the personal narratives component of the history as included in Part III.\textsuperscript{68}

Worth noting, however, is the fact that an interpretive gap does exist between the spoken word of the narrators and the transcribed word as it appears on the page here. Such a gap exists quite simply because the transcriptions include the emphasis and the punctuation I heard and which another person may have heard and transcribed quite differently. It can never be guaranteed that two transcripts of the same interview by different people will be precisely the same. In the same way that we all would remember and relate a given situation differently, we all hear things differently. The following sentence is one spoken by Emma during her interview and illustrates the subtle differences in interpretation and editing that the transcriber is ultimately responsible for:

\begin{quote}
I still feel uncomfortable using the word ‘lesbian’ because it has always been such a negative word – it’s always been a word that’s been used against me.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I still feel uncomfortable using the word LESBIAN because it has always been a negative word – you know? (Pause) It has always been a word that has been used against me.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I still feel ... uncomfortable? ... using the word lesbian. Because its always been a negative word, you know? It’s always been a word that has been used against me.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

In the first version I have edited out the words I judged to be extraneous to the story Emma was telling; in the second, I have highlighted the words I judged Emma to have emphasised and included conversational markers like pauses or laughter etc; and in the last I have opted to present Emma’s words as hesitant and questioning. Whilst the information relayed in this excerpt does not alter dramatically, there is a notable difference in how Emma is portrayed which is dependent in part on how her words are conveyed. In the transcribed narratives that are included in this thesis I have tried to add emphasis only where it was obvious and exaggerated, and have included pauses and laughter whenever they happened in the interview in an attempt to convey as much information as possible about the narrator. If I have felt it necessary to add information in the interests of clarity I have done so within square brackets. With the

\textsuperscript{68} Kennedy and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{69} Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
exception of the above example I have only used ellipsis to signify that word/s have been left out of the quote.

Beyond the comparatively straightforward problems inherent in presenting the narratives, lies the further dimension of the narrators interpretation of their own lives. Without any encouragement, all eight of the women I interviewed continually reflected upon their lives. Listening to their stories, I was repeatedly impressed by the manner in which they viewed their experiences through multiple lenses. In many instances, and on many occasions, there was room for despair, self-pity and anger yet none of the narrators focused solely on the difficult aspects of their experiences. They duly acknowledged the 'hard bits' and any 'lessons learnt' but always sought to place them in a wider context. Their experiences were never simply related as events that happened but were rather presented as events that happened in a particular way because of a specific set of reasons. These reasons were suggested, identified and explained by the narrators without prompting. The first same sex experiences of Emma, Pat, Erin, and Jocelyn, for example, combined moments of joy and despair that they each made sense of by way of a particular context.

For Emma, the experience was knife-edged, knowing it felt exactly 'right' to be with another woman, but also feeling doomed to the life of persecution she was familiar with due to her penchant for Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Emma explained her experiences as fitting roughly between the world of inverts and the world of lesbian feminism she found herself inhabiting in the 1980s. Pat, like Emma, felt she was sexually 'home' when she had sex with a woman for the first time but then had to come to terms with her lover's extreme possessiveness, on-going depression, and suicidal threats. The difficult decision that Pat ultimately made – to have her lover hospitalised – culminated in her being ostracised from the only lesbian community she knew of, in Canberra. During the interview Pat revisited this painful experience and explained how she had later come to understand what had happened in terms of how damaging internalised homophobia could be.

Erin and Jocelyn recalled their first lesbian experiences with wry expressions on their faces. For each it was a question of balancing the good with the bad. Erin, delighted by her first 'full' lesbian liaison, was unimpressed when she was unceremoniously 'dumped' to make way for the return of that woman's long-term partner, who had been living interstate. At the time Erin accepted this decision silently with a certain

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amount of unexpressed pain and sadness, saying it was only later that she came to fully understand the liaison in terms of the intricacies of monogamy and non-monogamy attached to many lesbian (feminist) relationships at that time. Jocelyn's first lesbian experience lasted significantly longer than Erin's but also ended badly. She had over twelve months of hidden joy with her girlfriend, during her last year at high school, only to be devastated when her lover ended the relationship and she found herself unable to confide in anyone. Jocelyn later came to understand that her part in keeping the relationship quiet was not solely a matter of individual choice but was made in the context of a strictly policed heterosexual economy.

Leigh, Dee, Kate, and Teresa's first same sex experiences were less immediately traumatic than those of Emma, Pat, Erin and Jocelyn, but were soon complicated by the 'rules' inherent in the lesbian (feminist) environment they found themselves mixing in. It was through this lens that they consciously situated many of the experiences they shared with me in 1994. Leigh, for example, clearly stated that it would never have occurred to her as a housewife and mother living in the suburbs of Canberra to be(come) a lesbian; she needed a context in which that could happen and in the early 1980s that context proved to be a feminist one.

The stories included in this history are narratives that have in a sense been frozen in time. Today, if asked the same questions, the narratives would almost certainly be different. For example, the fact that since 1994 two of the women interviewed have lost a parent each would probably have an impact on their stories in terms of the way they make sense of themselves in the world. That two of the eight were in a relationship with one another at the time of the interviews, but are not now, would also have an effect; likewise the fact that one of the women has, since 1994, become a grandmother for a second, third and fourth time. That another is now involved with a man and has recently had a child, would also undoubtedly have an impact on her perceptions of the past and her sexual identity. Nonetheless there is much to be gained from these narratives. Certainly, at the very least, the ways of remembering enacted by these women illustrate the flaws evident in many feminist methodological frameworks which presume that female interviewees do not analyse or make sense of their lives via lenses or frameworks feminist or otherwise.71

Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, for example, base much of their article ‘Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses’ on the assumption that women have internalised masculinist categories and are only able to understand and interpret their experiences through such categories. They therefore conclude that in an interview situation the feminist interviewer needs to be aware that ‘what is often missing is the woman’s own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity’. It is difficult to situate the women I interviewed in a framework like Anderson and Jack’s which not only disallows women agency, but also requires the categories ‘woman’ and ‘feminist’ to be mutually exclusive. If the category ‘woman’ assumes that all women share the common experience of being unable to distance themselves from male interpretative norms when interpreting their lives, the role and capabilities of the feminist woman interviewer are brought into question. The implication in Anderson and Jack’s scenario is that ‘the feminist interviewer’ is somehow able to distance herself from this male norm. But how is it that the feminist interviewer is able to rise above such restrictions? And what does their distinction between ‘woman’ and ‘feminist’ mean for the feminist woman who is interviewing feminist women and the lesbian (feminist) who is interviewing lesbian (feminist)s?

In her article, ‘A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview’, Kristina Minister similarly objectifies and limits ‘feminists’ and ‘women’. Based on her own observations of groups of women, Minister concludes that men and women speak a different language and as such their narratives in an interview situation will conform to certain sex-specific norms. Minister’s use of the category woman limits what women can say, how they can say it and how it can be interpreted. Like Anderson and Jack, the distinction Minister draws between ‘feminist interviewer’ and ‘woman narrator’ comes dangerously close to disallowing any cross-over between the two; both categories are objectified in such a way that it becomes nearly impossible for a ‘woman’ to be a ‘feminist’. The following quote more than illustrates these points:

>Feminist interviewers will not expect or try to elicit a repertoire of attention-getting monologic narratives, especially narratives that originated in previous communication contexts and are well-polished from repeated rehearsals. Jokes with punch lines, stories with dramatic points, and stories featuring the narrator as the central character will not be expected. On the other hand, feminist interviewers


73 This criticism aside, the Anderson and Jack article is a valuable contribution to the field of feminist oral history. It contains useful suggestions in relation to the unintentional directing of interviews as well as ways to avoid fitting the interviewee’s words into an existing schema.

74 Minister, ‘A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview’. 

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will expect that narrators’ stories and descriptions will exhibit an unfinished or incomplete quality and will not conform to the plot and action structures of publicly performed pieces. Again, if well-polished stories are offered ... they will be welcome, but feminist interviewers know that these stories are typical of men. A feminist oral history frame will nurture and assist in the interpretation of stories by women for women.75

Minister’s assumption that women’s narratives tend to be unfinished and unpolished makes it difficult, for example, to place the coming out stories of the narrators in this history. These stories, formed and reformed in conjunction with an individual’s identity over time, exist as monologic narratives combining plot, humour, emotion and dramatic points. According to Minister, this makes them the stories of men. And yet, like Kennedy and Davis, I would readily conclude from my interviewing experience that ‘many narrators had a flare for storytelling’.76 Kennedy and Davis recall an occasion when they accidentally asked one of their narrators a similar question to one they had asked at an earlier interview, to be regaled with a story virtually the same as the one told earlier.77 To them, this indicated the presence of an oral tradition, and not, as Minister would have it, a masculinist way of recounting the world.

Further to these definitional problems, dimensions of race, class and sexuality are glossed over in Minister’s and Anderson and Jack’s work. Their use of the homogenous category ‘woman’ disregards differences between women and, in so doing, only allows specific sorts of women agency. Gwendoline Etter-Lewis justifiably criticises what she describes as a shift in oral history from the ‘mythical male norm’ to the ‘white female norm, as the standard by which all others are judged’. She says, ‘to take a white, middle-class female’s experience as a given and generalise to all other women ignores the experiences of women of color and working-class women’.78 According to Etter-Lewis, an ‘organic transformation’ in the way black women’s lives are thought about and written about is crucial if we, as feminists, want to discontinue the trend that constructs us as ‘unwitting victims of our own ignorance’.79 Whilst concurring with the claims of racism and classism made by Etter-Lewis, I also found it

necessary to add ‘heterosexist bias’ to the list of issues that needed addressing in the process of tailoring a methodology for the purposes of this history.

In any research that includes oral testimony, the researcher makes the final decision as to what material makes it into the final product. This history is no different. The hours of taped interviews and pages of transcripts have ultimately been reduced to a fraction of their original size and content. In ‘She Gave Me That Look’ the decision as to what to include was based in the first instance on the individual experiences of the narrators which resonated against one another. These collective experiences, which were later organised around appropriate themes, include stories about: childhood sexual exploration in the mid-to-late 1960s and the early 1970s; adolescent sexual experiences, both lesbian and heterosexual, in the late 1960s and the 1970s; discrimination based on lesbianism in the 1970s and 1980s; sexual harassment within Women’s Studies and the women’s movement more generally in the 1980s; the influence of feminism on their Canberra-based lives particularly in relation to their lesbianism; literature (books, journals, newsletters) and popular culture (television, role models) that influenced their ‘choice’ to define themselves as lesbians; as well as the social life available to gays and lesbians in Canberra in the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s. The eight women’s narratives have also been placed in a historical context which allows them to be better understood. For as Arlene Stein writes, in the introduction to *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation*:

> To understand the texture of individual lives, I needed to obtain biographical information. But I also wanted to situate these self narratives in history. Therefore I needed to understand the context in which they emerged. \(^8^0\)

Situating oral narratives in history sounds like a relatively sensible and simple proposal but the process is, in fact, anything but straightforward. For history is not a given and stable entity but is itself a construction. Like Stein, however, I wanted my thesis to include an historical context that helped give the narrator’s lives texture. The decision as to which context would best serve the narratives proved to be a complex one given the infinite number of feasible contexts. The eight narratives included in this history could be presented against any number of conceivable backgrounds and analysed from any number of perspectives. They could be alongside the coming out stories of men of similar ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds; they could be assessed in terms of ‘normality’ in psychiatric or psychological terms; they could be compared to lesbian experiences from times past, from other cultures, from other

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80 Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, p. 8.
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countries. The background to the oral narratives could be geographic, political, social, secular, religious or a combination of any or all of these factors. Alternatively a contextual background could be omitted entirely.

The historical context that I finally decided would work best with the narratives comprises two main elements: the emergence of gay liberation in the 1970s; and the lesbian (feminist) environment that came to exist in Canberra after the advent of women's liberation in the 1970s. Although the Gay Liberation Movement was not specifically cited by any of the narrators as having contributed to their taking on a lesbian identity, and despite it never really making itself felt in Canberra, in terms of the socio-political climate of the period I thought it important to include a brief history of gay liberation as it emerged in Australia as well as an overview of the international and national gay movement (see Chapter Two). Comparatively speaking feminism, as it evolved in the years following the advent of women's liberation, proved to play a far more significant role in the narrators lives. Unfortunately, however, the feminist history of this period in Australia – and especially in Canberra – remains largely unwritten. In Part II of this thesis I provide a history of women's liberation in Canberra in the 1970s. In addition to providing a feminist context for the narratives, this history serves to highlight the problems inherent in relying too heavily on the formative years of the Women's Liberation Movement for knowledge of the recent feminist past. When histories of the recent feminist past focus primarily on the formative years of women's liberation, its political agenda and the issue-focused debates that ensued, the ordinary lived experiences of those who came to feminism after its inception tend to be denied a full place setting at the ‘second wave’ table.

Chapter Two

Contextualising lesbian and gay activism in Australia: from international to local

Of course, it's going to take an awfully long time before the community accepts homosexuality but we're making a start. Maybe if someone had taken this step 20 years ago we'd be a little ahead today.

John Ware, co-founder of CAMP Inc., 1970

In 1974 an Australian lesbian, Penny Short, was prompted by the Education Department who controlled her Teacher's College Scholarship to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist declared Short to be 'of above average intelligence, introspective and extremely self-aware' but he also recommended that she keep the fact that she was in a relationship with another woman quiet. Not heeding his advice Short wrote an explicitly sexual poem that was subsequently published in the student newspaper Arena (and is reproduced here). She was soon thereafter declared to be medically unfit for teaching by the psychiatrist and her scholarship was revoked by the Education Department. Short went public with her story and on March 29, 1974, a well-attended demonstration demanding her scholarship be re-instated took place outside

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1 John Ware quoted in The Australian, Saturday, 19 September, 1970, p. 15.
2 'Victimisation by Ed. Dept', Refractory Girl, No. 5, Summer, 1974, p. 11.
3 Poem originally appeared in Arena, reprinted in Refractory Girl, No. 5, Summer, 1974, p. 11.
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the Department. This demonstration and the continuing campaign in support of Penny Short marks a pivotal moment in Australia’s homosexual history because it was the first public demonstration in support of one specific lesbian’s rights. Going public with her complaint of lesbian discrimination was a timely move on Short’s part. Her decision and the ensuing support garnered by the campaign reflects the political climate in Australia as a time when lesbianism had only just begun to be treated as a separate political issue in both gay and women’s movements.

Figure 6  Penny Short; Penny Short demonstration, Department of Education, Sydney, 29 March, 1974.

In this chapter I provide a general introduction to gay liberation as it came to exist in Australia, as well as discussing Australia’s first radical lesbian group and the first national lesbian conference held in Australia. This abridged history is drawn from documentary sources and provides details about the wider gay and feminist movements as they existed in Australia throughout the 1970s. Throughout the chapter, I compare the evolution of gay and feminist activism in Australia with that of America and Britain; and comment on any significant instances where the situation in Canberra diverges from its international and national counterparts. I close the chapter with a section explaining why I chose Canberra as the focus of this history and begin the process of locating the narrators experiences alongside my own in this local context.

The Gay Liberation Movement

The emergence of a public gay and lesbian community happened in Australia in the early 1970s. Although its timing was similar to that of America and Britain, gay liberation followed a different path in Australia. Historian, Graham Willett, in an article tellingly titled ‘The Darkest Decade: Homophobia in 1950s Australia’ suggests that it is a mistake to try to approach Australia’s gay past via a framework which assumes repression to be simultaneously prohibitive and generative. This idea, popular in America and Europe, according to Willett does not apply to Australia. In Australia, Willett argues, the increased prohibition of homosexuality in the 1950s did
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not result in either a proliferation of discussion or the emergence of a public homosexual identity. Instead, Willett says, ‘far from witnessing the emergence of a new public, homosexual subject, the 1950s saw, instead, a period of repression and silencing … that … actually prevented the emergence of a public homosexuality until well into the 1960s’.

The fact that, unlike in America and Britain, no homophile organisations (or any equivalent political communities) existed in Australia prior to the advent of gay liberation supports Willett’s contention. In America these homophile organisations included the Mattachine Society (f. 1951); ONE Inc. (f. 1952); Daughters of Bilitis (f. 1955); Society for Individual Rights (f. 1964); the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (f. 1964). In Britain, they included the Homosexual Law Reform Society (f. 1958); the Minorities Research Group (f. 1963); and the Male and Female Homosexual Association of Britain (f. 1968).

The lack of homophile organisations in Australia placed it at a disadvantage when it came to political mobilisation around the homosexual issue in the early 1970s. For as historian John D’Emilio first argued and others like Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis have reiterated, ‘isolated men and women do not create, almost overnight, a mass movement premised upon a shared group identity’. The Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, which are so often credited as having ‘started’ the Gay Liberation Movement, were not formally recognised in Australia until 1978 with an International Gay Solidarity Day March to commemorate them. Some Australian gay activists, recognising the differences between the Australian and American gay movements, despairs of the Australian gay movement’s desire to mythologise an event so far removed from its shores:

What the Australian homosexual movement needs is not celebrations of mythic beginnings 10,000 miles away and ten years ago but the practical activism that is

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5 Other umbrella homophile organisations in America included the East Coast Homophile Organizations (f. 1963) and the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (f. 1966).

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tailored to the specific needs of our country and meaningful to the gay people who live here.7

In 1969, two gay organisations – one homosexual and one lesbian – emerged in Australia. Prior to this, small discreet homosexual sub-cultures ‘based around long-time friendship networks’ existed in most major cities in Australia.8 Similar to their overseas counterparts, these sub-cultures catered primarily to a male clientele although some lesbian and some mixed social networks did exist. Lucy Chesser was informed of ‘the existence of substantial lesbian and gay social networks dating back at least until the late 1940s’ by women (who had identified as ‘lesbian’ during the 1960s) whom she interviewed in Melbourne in the early 1990s.9

These women recalled being able to locate other lesbians in ‘camp’ social networks that tended to be clustered around the theatre, sport and the army. Additionally, in the mid 1960s a mixed lesbian and gay social club, ‘Checkmates’, formed in Melbourne. Although the group did not last long into the 1970s it performed a valuable service in the years it was operational. Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane too had their share of mixed lesbian and gay social groups prior to the emergence of gay liberation and a more public community. Less is known about the other capital cities but it seems likely that there were small pockets of gay men and lesbians who socialised separately and together. Prior to the advent of gay liberation these social networks were, for the most part, quite closeted and difficult to locate – they were certainly not advertised in the

Figure 7 Lesbians in Melbourne cartoon.

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mainstream press. The publication of an article titled ‘The Shy Homosexual Woman’ in the glossy magazine, *Cleo*, in 1994 was a first in Australia. The 5,000+ enquiries it inspired in the eighteen months that followed is indicative of the public silence surrounding lesbianism prior to then. One woman and her partner of some years met others lesbians for the very first time after reading *Cleo* and contacting ‘Lynx’, the organisation whose members had been interviewed for the article. In her words:

It was a real eye-opener to find that there were so many other women [lesbians] around ... I don’t think people knew where to go. They didn’t know how to get information. That’s why it was so stunning when it was published in *Cleo*. Because it was something that everyone read. I mean I wouldn’t have known where to go to find a gay newspaper in those days. So how did you find out where the network was?10

‘Lynx’ had evolved out of ‘Claudia’s Group’, a group who wanted to provide ‘non-radical women’ with an alternative contact point to gay liberation and lesbian feminism.11 They had advertised initially in *The Age* and after receiving dozens of calls from that exposure had later decided to explore other options for expanding their network. They approached Ita Buttrose of the *Australian Women’s Weekly* hoping that a mention in its pages ‘would reach a lot of housebound women of the type we wish to attract’.12 Several hundred kilometres away in Sydney, the Clover Single Ladies Recreational Club13 was established for similar reasons as ‘Lynx’ (and like ‘Lynx’ is still going strong today). In July 1972 four women, Gayle Austin, her girlfriend Vicky, Jan McInnies and Kerry Cox ran the following advertisement in the *Nation Review*:

Conservative camp ladies don’t exist?? We do!! We’ve got an exclusive club with a membership of four!! Would you like to join and make it more? Location: Sydney. Review box 2750.14

The four women wanted to ‘provide a club with all the essentials to give a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere where women [could] get together and socialise without harassment’.15 Gayle said that while she ‘could see the need for a political forum’ she had personally ‘had enough of fighting causes for women’ and ‘was really looking to

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13 The name was changed to ‘Clover Business Women’s Club’ the following year seeing as though three of its eleven members were married at that stage. Anna Maher, ‘A History of Clover’, 1987, unpublished paper, p. 1.
create a space for women where they wouldn't feel like exhibitionists because they were hugging'.

The enormous response to the Cleo article and the existence of groups like 'Claudia's Group', 'Lynx' and 'Clover' indicates, as Lucy Chesser argues, 'the importance of extending lesbian and gay history ... to areas apart from those cohered around lesbian and gay political organisation'. To not include these aspects of the past compromises and misrepresents lesbian and gay history in Australia. Chesser's short history of the 'Australasian Lesbian Movement', 'Claudia's Group' and 'Lynx' did not see publication until 1996 in a small feminist journal and it was only in 1992 that Sydney magazine, Lesbians on the Loose, ran an article about the low profile 'Clover'. Prior to this, significant social networks for lesbians outside of feminism were assumed not to have existed in Australia in the 1970s.

Although there were hidden gay and lesbian social sub-cultures in Australian cities prior to the emergence of gay liberation, it would appear that both social and politically inspired sub-cultures emerged later than many of their overseas counterparts. Reasons as to why the decades prior to gay liberation in Australia unfolded so differently to America and Europe may be found in their geographical location, political backgrounds and wider cultural histories. One of the key differences why gay and lesbian bar sub-cultures were so slow to emerge in Australia, for example, may be found in its unique drinking regulations throughout the twentieth-century, especially in Canberra.

Public bars in Australia have a long tradition of early closing and sex segregated drinking areas. Six o'clock closing, also known as the '6 o'clock swill', was first implemented across Australia during the first world war, and almost certainly impeded the emergence of lesbian and gay bar cultures in Australia, and in Canberra in particular. In Australia, since British colonisation/invasion, it was mandatory to possess a licence to sell alcohol, and from 1916 onwards most State governments passed laws to close public bars at six o'clock. At that time these laws weren't implemented in the Federated (later Australian) Capital Territory because the sale of

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17 Chesser, 'Australasian Lesbian Movement, "Claudia's Group" and Lynx', p. 79.
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liquor in the Territory was illegal. In 1911 the Minister for Home and Territories, King O’Malley, a firm supporter of prohibition, had decreed that the Territory would be ‘dry’. This did not equate to alcohol never being consumed by Canberrans, rather that they drank, purchased, and imported their liquor from neighbouring New South Wales (NSW). In the 1920s Canberra was something of an oddity with most of its population constantly heading across the border to NSW for a drink. By then a number of hotels had been built in Canberra but none of them were able to legally serve alcohol. Amidst a growing consensus that the existing liquor laws were ridiculous, a referendum was held to decide whether to maintain the ban; to extend it to include the consumption of alcohol; to end the ban and introduce six o’clock closing; or to end the ban and to only allow government alcohol sales. Despite the best efforts of prohibition advocates, Canberrans voted resoundingly to end the ban, and in September 1928 six o’clock trading was introduced into the national capital.

In addition to the tradition of six o’clock closing, public bars throughout Australia, catered primarily to a male clientele, with women only permitted to drink in specified ‘Ladies Lounges’ where the drinks were more expensive and the décor usually included a loud television, fake or wilting flowers, and gaudy carpet. The sex segregation of public bars and the tradition of ‘ladies lounges’, variously enforced until the 1970s, unquestionably had an impact on the sorts of gatherings that were possible in public drinking establishments in Australia. In 1965 women in Brisbane and Canberra staged protests in local pubs that gained them some notoriety but ultimately didn’t bring about the end of the deeply ingrained Australian tradition of segregated drinking. This remained a battle to be fought in the early 1970s after the official emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement. In theory sex segregated bars might have potentially provided the right conditions for same sex bar cultures to emerge in Australia, but in practice, this was an atmosphere laden with heterosexual undertones. Heavily dependent on, and regulated by heterosexual norms, this was not an environment in any way sympathetic to gays and lesbians.

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20 The Hotel Canberra (1924); Hotel Kurrajong (1926); Hotel Ainslie (1927); Hotel Wellington (1927).
The absence of homophile organisations, the lack of public awareness and debate about homosexuality and the limited possibilities for bar cultures to exist, all combined to impede the development of both social and political gay and lesbian communities, sub-cultures and networks in Australia. It was 1971 before a homosexual organisation in Australia had over a thousand members, whereas in America, for example, in 1966 the Californian-based Society for Individual Rights (SIR) had attracted in the vicinity of a thousand members in the two years since its formation in response to police harassment in gay bars. On the other hand, membership of ‘Lynx’, one of Australia’s longest-running (if only recently acknowledged) lesbian groups, had yet to reach a thousand in 1993 – a figure which the US Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) membership had almost certainly passed prior to the first ‘Lynx’ meeting in 1976.

The first politically-oriented homosexual organisation in Australia, the Canberra-based Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) of the Australian Capital Territory, was not founded until 27 July 1969 by solicitor, Michael Landale and university lecturer, Thomas Mautner. The society’s primary aim during its three year existence was: to advocate that all sexual conduct between consenting adults in private should be beyond the scope of the criminal law, and to oppose the provisions of the draft criminal code in this area.

The society is said to have ceased existing in about 1972 some four years before homosexual acts were decriminalised in the ACT.

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22 By late 1971 Australia’s Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) had over 1500 members nationally.
23 Martin Duberman, Stonewall, Plume Books, New York, 1994, p. 99. Bearing in mind the substantial differences in population at a national level, it is worth noting that the Australian membership was nationwide whilst the SIR was limited primarily to Californian membership.
24 Still in existence in the mid 1990s, ‘Lynx’ financial records in 1993 indicate a membership of more than 800 since the group’s inception in 1976. Financial membership at any one time is estimated to be around the 250 mark. See Chesser, ‘Australasian Lesbian Movement, “Claudia’s Group” and Lynx’, p. 82.
25 Passionate advocates for homosexual law reform, neither Landale or Mautner were homosexuals themselves. The society was not interested in actively pursuing gay rights issues other than the decriminalisation of male homosexual acts.
27 In Australia, all states and territories, individually had constitutional responsibility for the decision of whether or not to decriminalise (male) homosexual acts between consenting adults. South Australia (SA) was the first to decriminalise such acts in 1972, followed by the ACT in 1976, and the others variously in 1980 (VIC), 1983 (NT), 1984 (NSW), 1989 (WA), 1990 (QLD). Between 1990 and 1997, Tasmania was the only state in Australia where sexual acts between men were illegal. After nine years of protest by the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group, including a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee in 1992, this was finally overturned in May 1997. For a detailed account of the battle see the Tasmanian
The second homosexual organisation in Australia emerged in late 1969 as a Melbourne chapter of the American-based DOB. Earlier that year, two of its founding members, Marion Paull and Claudia Pearce, had independently of one another, written to DOB in America wanting information on how to set up a group in Australia. The American group was able to put them, and three other women, in touch with one another, and by January 1970 with a membership of fifteen the Australian chapter of DOB was officially launched.\(^{28}\) Some six months after its inception the Australian group broke its ties with DOB because it was thought that the American organisation was going about its aims in a way that could only be deleterious to the image of lesbians. According to one of the Australian group’s handouts, the unfortunate influence of gay liberation in America had led to DOB attending ‘Gay Power’ demonstrations and wearing t-shirts ‘embellished with the labels “butch”, “femme”.’\(^{29}\) This was considered too radical by the Melbourne group, which quickly changed its name to the ‘Australasian Lesbian Movement’ (ALM) as a way of distancing themselves from both DOB and America. Nonetheless, this ‘new’ group maintained the same aims it had as a chapter of DOB. The following objectives appeared in a four page information handout circulated amongst members in 1970:

1. Education of the Lesbian enabling her to understand herself and to make her adjustment to Society in all its social, civic and economic implications – by establishing and maintaining a library of both fiction and non-fiction literature on the sex deviant theme: by sponsoring public meetings on pertinent subjects to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other professions: providing the Lesbian a forum for the interchange of ideas with her own group.

2. Education of the public, developing an understanding and acceptance of the Lesbian as an individual, leading to an eventual breakdown of the erroneous taboos and prejudices – by public discussion meetings and by dissemination of educational literature on the Lesbian theme.

3. Encouragement of any participation in responsible research dealing with homosexuality.

4. Investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual proposing and promoting changes to provide an equitable handling of cases involving this minority group through due process of law in the State legislatures.\(^{30}\)


\(^{28}\) For the most comprehensive history of lesbian organisations in Australia during this period see Chesser, ‘Australasian Lesbian Movement, “Claudia’s Group” and Lynx’.


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The handout also maintained that one of the group’s primary aims was to educate ‘the public by showing them that we are just like everyone else (apart from our sex preferences)’.31

In America at this time, reformist objectives such as those of DOB, which had been so fundamental to homophile organisations throughout the 1950s and 1960s, were being bulldozed in the rush to get to the barricades and to start the revolution. By the late 1960s a serious rift had already developed between DOB and the ‘new’ lesbian feminists who wanted to abandon gay (male) organising in favour of feminism. As Rita Laporte wrote in a letter to Barbara Gittings in 1968:

As I see it, when you’ve accomplished your aims in the homophile movement, you can proudly point to the fact that now lesbians have full second class citizenship, along with all women. That’s nowhere near enough for me. I was not only born a lesbian, but a feminist as well!32

Sadly, this fundamental and continuing disagreement resulted in 1970 in the dissolution of DOB’s national structure and the demise of its publication The Ladder.

The lack of homophile organisations in Australia saw the lesbian (and gay) struggles for equality take on a somewhat different hue from the situation as it existed in America at the same time. One of the original founders of the Australian chapter of DOB, Marion Paull, describes how barren the 1950s and 1960s were for lesbians living in Australia:

The fifties and sixties were interesting times – there were no facilities or support networks for women or lesbians then. We did what we could with what was available. The literature was limited. Politics were nonexistent.33

As such, from late 1969 and throughout the early 1970s, during the few years it existed (and even though it ‘frightened the life out of most of us’34), the ALM acted as a crucial refuge for many lesbians in (and near to35) Australia. In the words of Lucy Chesser, it ‘provid[ed] the first public avenue through which isolated lesbians might access others’.36 The ALM was, for a short time, the only openly lesbian organisation in the

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32 Rita Laporte to Barbara Gittings, August 20, 1968, as cited in D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, p. 229.
35 Whilst the majority of ALM members lived in and around Melbourne, its membership also extended throughout Australia and in a few instances as far as New Zealand and New Guinea.
country and its value as illustrated by the following woman’s experience, cannot be underestimated:

For eight or nine years I hadn’t had it ... any feminine sex ... and when you’ve been used to it and miss it, it’s something dreadful. I worried that I’d never have it ... never feel another woman’s body for the rest of my life. Oh, it was terrible. Then this group met, so I got in touch with them ... They had a monthly magazine but I couldn’t join because I was married - I’d have to get my husband’s permission ... Well, that was the last thing I could do, but they would send me the [little] monthly magazine ... two or three little sheets. So I had to get it sent to work ... Petrified in case anyone found out. Oh, the first time I got one, I couldn’t believe reading it, I was so thrilled, to read something that other lesbians had written. You can’t believe what it was like ... we used to go to the occasional coffee night ... I met a friend there, and ... we became mates and we were together for fifteen years. Two and a half years before I separated from my husband and then we lived together for another twelve years.37

This woman’s experience was not dissimilar to that of large numbers of women in America upon the inception of DOB in 1955. It is interesting to note that the first lesbian organisation to exist in Australia formed almost a decade and a half its American equivalent.

It was not until September 1970 that Australia’s longest running homosexual organisation, Campaign Against Moral Persecution Inc. (CAMP), was founded in Sydney by John Ware and Christobel Poll. Their original aim was to establish a ‘small group which would be knowledgeable about current thinking on homosexuality and ... able to respond publicly, putting forward a gay viewpoint’.38 The first press coverage about CAMP appeared in The Australian on September 10, 1970. In a short but sympathetic story titled ‘Homosexuals form group aimed at ending aura of mystique, secrecy’, journalist Janet Hawley, reports that the new group hopes ‘to get rid of the numerous misinterpretations about homosexuality by encouraging homosexuals to admit that they are, and to discuss it openly’.39 A short time later, in the ‘Weekend Review’ section of The Australian, Hawley writes a follow-up piece about CAMP based on interviews she conducted with Ware and Poll in their own homes. She emphasises the non-confrontational tactics of CAMP saying that although ‘the group aims [to] redefine[e] ... the homosexual’s place in society ... John [Ware] and Chris [Poll] are

38 Robert French, ‘Coming Out, Ready Or Not’ in Camping By a Billabong, p. 111.
39 The Australian, Thursday 10 September, 1970, p. 3.
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not planning any mass demonstrations’. In the first issue of the organisation’s journal, Camp Ink, in November 1970, the group’s aims are stated as follows:

The overall aim of CAMP INC is to bring about a situation where homosexuals can enjoy good jobs and security in those jobs, equal treatment under the law, and the right to serve our country without fear of exposure and contempt.

Although CAMP started out being ‘quietly reformist’ with the unofficial aim of keeping their ‘presence in the public eye by publishing letters to the editor and challenging statements that came out’, it was this organisation, by virtue of its size and eventual radical stance, that marked the beginnings in Australia of what would eventually become a revolutionary approach to gay liberation.

The Gay Liberation Movement was still in its infancy in Australia in 1972-73 but was perhaps most established in Sydney and Adelaide. In Sydney numerous gay rights demonstrations and protests took place throughout 1972, and the first ‘Gay Lib’ dance, which was attended by over 600, was held in June 1973. In Adelaide gay liberation organised what was perhaps Australia’s first gay camp in May 1973. By the mid-to-late 1970s homosexual organising in Australia was reaching its peak. The localised efforts of a number of groups in different States

Figure 8 Cover of Camp Ink, 1976.

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40 The Australian, Saturday 19 September, 1970, p. 15.
42 French, ‘Coming Out, Ready Or Not’, p. 112.
43 John Ware as cited in Willett, Living Out Loud, p. 33.
45 These organisations included: The Homosexual Reform Society of the Australian Capital Territory (July 1969); The Australasian Lesbian Movement in Melbourne (1969-72); CAMP Inc. in Sydney (July 1970); CAMP Queensland (February 1971); Society 5/CAMP Victoria (February 1971); CAMP NSW (formerly CAMP Inc.)(April 1971); CAMP Western Australia (May 1971); CAMP Tasmania (May 1971); CAMP ACT (September 1971); CAMP South Australia (October 1971); Gay Liberation Front (March 1972); Gay Liberation groups at Sydney University, UNSW, the Australian National University and Newcastle University (March 1972).
had successfully increased public awareness of homosexuality and with it the need for further political mobilisation. A number of demonstrations/celebrations, seminars and forums and the ensuing media coverage had paved the way for the first national conference on homosexuality in 1975. Held in Melbourne on the 16-17 August the conference attendance of over 800 indicates how much support the movement had gained over a relatively short period of time. A few years later, on the morning of June 24, 1978, an International Homosexuality Solidarity March was held in Sydney to commemorate Stonewall. Over 600 people are reported to have marched in support of law reform and against discrimination and police harassment. Later that evening a march around the Sydney streets was planned. It was the ninth anniversary of the Stonewall riots. About 1,000 people turned out – drag queens, lesbians and gays alike – chanting political slogans and carrying banners.

The atmosphere remained festive until around midnight when without any warning, police began grabbing people from the edges of the march and throwing them into paddy wagons. The rally ended in mayhem with 53 people arrested – 23 women and 30 men. A further march was quickly scheduled for 15 July in support of those arrested and to protest against police harassment. The planned route was to start in

46 Demonstrations and celebrations that occurred in Sydney during the early 1970s include: the first gay rights demonstration outside NSW Liberal Party headquarters (October 1971); Sydney Gay Liberation march in Sydney IWD march (March 1972); Gay Demonstration outside the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) offices (July 1972); 200 march in Sydney to celebrate 5th anniversary of homosexual law reform in the UK (July 1972); 150 protest outside St Clements Anglican Church following the sacking of Peter Bonsall-Boone as Church Secretary (November 1972); Builders Labourers Federation announces work ban on Macquarie University campus in solidarity with gay rights (June 1973); 600 attend Sydney Gay Liberation dance (June 1973); first Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) demonstration held outside South Australian Parliament (July 1973); 15 arrests at Gay Pride week demonstration (September 1973). For further details see French, 'Chronology of the Early "Gay Movement" in Australia'.

47 Early NSW forums/seminars include: Law Reform Forum at University of NSW, speakers including Ann Deveson, Rev Ted Noffs and Prof Alex Carey (October 1971); first Sexual Liberation Forum organised by Campus CAMP at Sydney University, speakers including Dennis Altman and Wendy Bacon (October 1971); second Sexual Liberation Forum at Sydney University, speakers including Germaine Greer, Gillian Leahy and Dennis Altman (January 1972); Sydney Gay Liberation runs sessions at Sydney Women's Liberation Conference (June 1972); Forum on aversion therapy organised by Gay Liberation at UNSW (July 1972); Seminar on Female Homosexuality organised by IWY Collective and CAMP-NSW (May/June 1975). This material is drawn from various newsletters, primary documents and ephemera, as well as: French, 'Chronology of the Early "Gay Movement" in Australia'; Gisela Kaplan, The Meagre Harvest: The Australian Women's Movement 1950s-1990s, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.


49 Strictly speaking, this was not the first national conference on homosexuality as 'Acceptance', a group for gay Roman Catholics, held a national conference the previous year in April in Sydney.
Martin Place and to go down George and Williams Streets to Kings Cross, ending up at the Darlinghurst Police Station. Over 2,000 people took part in this follow-up protest. These marches marked the beginning of what is now internationally known as the Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras. As Martin Duberman so eloquently puts it, 'the Stonewall riots ... became a symbolic event of international importance - a symbol of such potency as to serve, ever since 1969, as a motivating force and rallying cry'.

Similarly to the situation as it evolved in America and Britain, lesbians began to meet and organise separately in Australia in the 1970s. In terms of existing research, a state-by-state comparison as to how, why and when separate organising emerged is not yet possible. Australia's first ra
dicalesbian group appeared in Melbourne a couple of years after its American counterpart had emerged.

Figure 9 Cover of Camp Ink, 1976.

Radicalesbians and the first national lesbian conference

In the early 1970s the Women's Liberation Movement in Melbourne spawned a new sort of lesbian (feminist) activist - the radicalesbian. The Radicalesbian group had a relatively short life span but they achieved more in that short time than any other lesbian group in Australia had previously, including importantly, organising

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51 Duberman, Stonewall, p. 224.

52 In America it was as early as 1969 that women began defining themselves and organising as radical lesbians. See, for example, Martha Shelfe, 'Notes of a Radical Lesbian' (1969) in Robin Morgan (ed.), Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, Vintage Books, New York, 1970.
Australia's first national lesbian conference.\textsuperscript{53} There is no indication that lesbian feminists were organising separately anywhere else in Australia prior to the Radicalesbians in Melbourne in 1973.\textsuperscript{54}

The Radicalesbians emerged out of Melbourne's Gay Women's Group which had itself begun in response to the sexism of some of the men in gay liberation. The creation of the Gay Women's Group within gay liberation in Melbourne in 1972 is one of the first instances in Australia of women separating from men within the movement on such grounds. By 1975 gay liberation in Melbourne and Sydney had been massively deserted by women with limited numbers remaining actively involved. At the First National Homosexuality Conference in Melbourne in 1975 Laurie Bebbington and Margaret Lyons presented a controversial paper titled 'Why Should We Work With You? Lesbian-Feminists Versus "Gay" Men'. Both women had remained involved with gay liberation when many others jumped ship but they were angry at the continuing sexism and wanted it to stop:

Lesbians in homosexual movements have carried our gay 'brothers' on our back for too long. Women who want to walk straight do not carry unnecessary burden. The authors of this paper have worked in homosexual rights movements for a number of years. We continued to do so long after most lesbians walked out. Now we write this paper in anger and frustration. We are tired of picking up the pieces of each other and our lesbian sisters after oppressive treatment from male homosexuals. We have no more energy to waste.\textsuperscript{55}

The tone of Bebbington and Lyons' paper indicates that they believed that the problematic situation they were describing as existing in gay liberation was a widespread problem. The surprised response of some female delegates (from CAMP Queensland and WA) to the antagonism between men and women at the conference would indicate however that the 'problem' may not have been Australia wide. Nonetheless, it was the problem that was in part, at least, responsible for the eventual emergence of Radicalesbians in Melbourne. In the beginning, several of the original Gay Women's Group continued to attend gay liberation meetings but before too long

\textsuperscript{53} Chris Sitka, one of the original Melbourne Radicalesbians compiled a history of this conference in 1988 which also included background information about the Radicalesbian group. I am indebted to her unpublished history for much of the information contained in the following account of the conference. Chris Sitka, 'A Record of the Melbourne Radicalesbians and the Radicalesbian Conference in Sorrento, 1973', Birdwood, NSW, 1988, unpublished paper.

\textsuperscript{54} For a comprehensive history of non-political lesbian organising in pre-1980 Melbourne see Chesser, 'Australasian Lesbian Movement, "Claudia's Group" and Lynx', pp. 69-91.

their ideas were influenced by the imported politics of radical feminism.\textsuperscript{56} It was thus that the group came to change its name:

> We made an actual decision to use the word lesbian - rather than camp, gay, woman-identified-woman - to describe ourselves at that point. We also chose Radicalesbian as distinct from Radical feminist because we wanted to identify ourselves positively as lesbians ... Radicalesbian was about the most 'out' and outrageous name we could confront our various oppressors with.\textsuperscript{57}

The Radicalesbians engaged in numerous political actions. They published a collection of poems and articles called the \textit{Radical Feminist Collection}. They ensured that a constant presence of lesbian graffiti existed throughout the city of Melbourne. They produced thousands of 'This Oppresses Women' stickers for use in censoring and politicising the content of sexist advertisements in magazines and on billboards. They joined forces with gay liberation for a 'kiss-in' in the city square. They kidnapped, blindfolded, tied up and harangued the organiser of a strip show until he promised to publish a public apology to all women - which he did. They organised the first women's dance in Melbourne which was attended by about 200 women and which began a tradition of women's dances and women-only events that was to last almost two decades. They held women's camps in the bush where they practised 'feminist guerilla training' which included learning how to throw rocks for maximum impact. They took over pool tables in certain venues along Sydney Road where they learnt and sharpened their pool skills and created a social environment for women in what was typically a male environment. They spoke to various women's groups, schools and universities. They helped to set up Melbourne's Halfway House. And they published a pirate edition of Robin Morgan's \textit{Monster} complete with the original and uncensored version of her infamous poem 'Arraignment' in which she accuses Ted Hughes of the murder of his first wife, Sylvia Plath, and his second wife, who like Plath, gassed herself to death.

In addition to the publication of \textit{Monster}, the Radicalesbians also demonstrated noisily at a touring Royal Shakespeare Company performance which unwittingly made the mistake of including the poetry of both Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes in their production. By handing out copies of 'Arraignment' to the general public the Radicalesbians created havoc outside the theatre and captured the attention of the

\textsuperscript{56} According to Graham Willett, the arrival in Melbourne of Jenny Pausacker and her friends who had recently returned from London where they had been reading the latest Women's Liberation tracts and manifestos - undoubtedly including the New York Radicalesbian 'Women-Identified-Women' manifesto - rechannelled the political agenda of the Gay Women's Group. Willett, \textit{Living Out Loud}, p. 66.

\textsuperscript{57} Chris Sitka, 'A Record of the Melbourne Radicalesbians', p. 6.
press. The success of their actions drew a response from none other than Robin Morgan herself in the form of thanks, and may well be one of the earliest individual acknowledgments between America and Australia of an international feminist movement. In the words of Robin Morgan upon receiving a copy of the pirate edition of *Monster*:

What can I say about my feelings of holding in my hand a reality brought about through the magick of an international feminist movement, brought about through your courage and work and commitment and love? We are half a planet away from each other, and still we are together, one indissoluble, an energetic flow continuing in the current of our foremothers.58

The Radicalesbians became something of a rent-a-crowd for good feminist causes, the most memorable perhaps being in response to a papal encyclical which condemned afresh the option of abortion. A large contingent of women from Radicalesbians dressed up in their Sunday best and went to the main cathedral in Melbourne where they spread out amongst the congregation and walked out on cue into a pre-organised media frenzy when the bishop began to read out the new encyclical.

Figure 10.

This plethora of actions aside, the most far-reaching effort of the Radicalesbians was the organisation of the Sorrento conference as not only the first national lesbian conference in Australia, but as the moment when the first steps towards a national lesbian feminist movement were

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made. In the words of participant Chris Sitka:

The National Radicalesbian Conference of Sorrento was a major milestone in the development of lesbian politics in this country ... Sorrento saw an exhilarating gathering of, what was to us then, the rather phenomenal number of over 60 lesbians from around Australia.\(^{59}\)

Sorrento, a coastal town on the Mornington Peninsula, south of Melbourne, is a conservative seaside holiday spot especially popular with family groups throughout the summer months. It was an unlikely choice for Australia's first national lesbian conference. On the weekend of July 6-8 in 1973 the Whitehall Guesthouse was witness to sixty plus lesbians converging under its roof for a conference and celebration of radicalesbian politics. Advertised in local newsletters throughout Australia (including the *Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter* and the more recently established ACT Women's Electoral Lobby newsletter), the conference was billed as an informal gathering born of 'a need to bring radical lesbian consciousness to bear on issues of sexism and feminism and to establish a theory of radical lesbianism relevant to the Australian feminist movement'.\(^{60}\)

This gathering, almost forgotten, was briefly resuscitated in 1989 when participant, Chris Sitka, presented a sixty page paper about it at the Lesbian Feminist Conference held in Adelaide in January that year – this, some fifteen years later, was arguably, the second national lesbian gathering to be held in Australia. The material about the Melbourne Radicalesbians and the Sorrento conference as included in this section is primarily taken from those sixty pages which, despite their historic value to lesbian history in Australia, remain unpublished and difficult to obtain over a decade later.

The guesthouse at Sorrento was booked by the Radicalesbians under the guise of the gathering being a 'women's group' which the proprietor accepted without a murmur. No doubt any half-formed notions he may have had of this being a peaceful group of quilters were quickly put to rest with the arrival of his first guests for the weekend. Perhaps against his better judgment, and undoubtedly lured by the thought of over $800 for one weekend in low season, the guesthouse owner did not attempt to draw a halt to proceedings.

Whilst the majority of women who attended the Sorrento conference were from Melbourne, a reasonable number made it from Adelaide, and it is reported that several from Sydney, Canberra and various country areas also attended. At the time, and in

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\(^{59}\) Sitka, 'A Record of the Melbourne Radicalesbians', p. 2.

\(^{60}\) *Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter*, May, 1973, p. 2.
the years that followed, there have been disputes as to whether this spread of participants warrants Sorrento being called a national gathering. The conference organisers presented a convincing argument saying that as they had advertised nationally it should be recognised as a national event regardless of where the participants originated from.

The first evening of the conference, one of the Melbourne Radicalesbians, Sharon, was quick to work out that more women were going to show up than they had anticipated. Unquestionably there was going to be a shortfall between beds and women. Not wanting the guesthouse staff to work this out, Sharon arranged to take over the task of room allocation from them – a task that would prove to be much more difficult than even she had thought possible:

I remember I was in charge of room allocation. It was very political, and complicated. Women kept coming up and saying ‘Do you think you could arrange this?’ and ‘What about this?’ and ‘For god’s sake don’t put me in with her’.61

The excess of women meant that not only did meal times become something of a relay event, but beds had to be shared. In the over-heated and highly-sexed atmosphere of the conference this made for some interesting dynamics. One woman recalls:

Women were shifting rooms at a great rate as new alliances were made. I remember there was a steamy atmosphere in the dormitory I was in. There were quite a few bunks, and even more women, all fucking in the same room – only in twos – but all the same it was pretty full on.62

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This situation echoes that of the New York Radicalesbians in the early 1970s as described by Ros Baxandall:

Lesbianism wasn’t a big thing because virtually everyone was experimenting with it. We’d go away to write something and almost everyone would sleep together. We even drew lots [to determine who would sleep with whom] and then cheated.63

The theory and practice of ‘fucking’ was high on the list of priorities at the conference, and it (and a number of other issues that arose during the conference) continued to be debated and proscribed in lesbian (feminist) circles throughout the rest of the 1970s and well into the 1980s. Jenny Pausacker’s Sorrento contribution, for example, was intended to initiate discussion around ‘the unwritten rules [that] have been built up about how a lesbian feminist relationship should work’.64 Her paper ‘Rules and Relationships’ listed the rules as she and her friends in Adelaide had experienced them since the inception of Radicalesbians in Australia. Pausacker listed and outlined the rules as a starting point for discussion:

1. Feminist lesbians who are fucking together don’t:
   - pash on in public places
   - go everywhere together
   - live together/sleep together every night
   - say they want to be monogamous
   
   The reasons for this set of rules are something like:
   - setting up a situation for yourself where you can’t drift into making a fucking relationship your main security or interest
   - making sure that other people can still get through to you

2. Within the relationship there are other rules. Feminist lesbians don’t
   - fall in love
   - feel jealous
   - want to be monogamous
   
   and do
   - talk about what they are doing, not only with each other
   
   The reasons for this set of rules are something like:
   - getting suspicious about the idea of love because it mainly seems to have worked to keep women out of action
   - getting suspicious about monogamy because it mainly seems to be there to make stable worker-producing families

63 Ros Baxandall as cited in Alice Echols, Daring to be BAD: Radical Feminism in America 1967-75, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 212.

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3. Then if you do get involved in multiple fucking relationships there are some other rules. These aren’t quite as clear cut yet, but my random sample agreed that:
- you can’t work on spontaneity eg. if you go to a party you need to know beforehand who goes home with whom
- some kind of balance of time has to be worked out
- you don’t want to know either everything or nothing about your lover’s other lovers

The reasons for this set of rules are something like:
- since we have been trained to expect that we will get our main emotional security from one other person, we have to untrain ourselves. To demand of ourselves and the women we love that we act as if we were there already is silly.

In 1991, in my honours thesis, I noted that perhaps the most surprising thing about Pausacker’s ‘Rules and Regulations’ was the relevance they still had, almost twenty years later in lesbian (feminist) circles, as ‘the lesbian feminist prescriptive model’ on ideologically sound lesbian relationships. A number of the narrators’ experiences of coming out in the late 1970s and early 1980s – as included in Chapters Five and Six – reflect the complex regulatory nature of lesbian feminist ideology at that time which ‘policied’ behaviour both inside and outside intimate relationships.

Many of the papers presented at Sorrento focused in some way on fucking; from the issue of non-monogamy to sexuality being about more that just fucking. ‘You didn’t have to actually fuck to be a lesbian’ recalls Sitka, ‘that’s not what it was all about’.

Other topics included: the question of identity, and how to define ‘lesbian’; images and affirmation of lesbianism; lesbian feminist culture; dependency and coming out; and an Australian version of the the New York Radicalesbian manifesto. But the paper that generated the most controversy and hostility was on bisexuality and, in fact, consisted entirely of an excerpt from Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love’s Sappho was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism. The issues discussed at Sorrento and the actions of the Melbourne-based Radicalesbian group in 1973 (as

68 Despite being influenced by New York’s Radicalesbians, the Melbourne Radicalesbians did emerge out of an Australian context complete with its own specific set of demands and ideologies. Defending the Australian Radicalesbian Manifesto, Chris Sitka explains: ‘There is some idea this paper may have been just a reading of the New York Radicalesbian Manifesto. However the very Australian language in it marks it as our composition’. Sitka, ‘A Record of the Melbourne Radicalesbians’, p. 12.
69 Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, Sappho was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism (1972), Stein and Day Paperbacks, New York, 1973.
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outlined earlier) indicate that there were significant differences in the level of lesbian feminist consciousness and organising in cities across Australia.

In Sydney, as in Melbourne, throughout the first years of the 1970s, gay organising and feminist organising remained largely separate entities with only a few individuals moving between both. One of the most significant differences between Canberra and the larger cities of Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, was that in Canberra, gay organising was low key and had nowhere near the community impact that women's liberation did.

In late 1971, following a meeting held by NSW CAMP members in Canberra in early September, an ACT branch of CAMP was formed. During its short-lived existence, the ACT branch favoured 'political agitation in favour of law reform and the rights of homosexuals' and worked to 'promulgate the plight of the homosexual in society and ... capture the attention of the Australian citizen'. CAMP ACT boldly announced its presence to the wider Canberra society in a letter published in The Canberra Times on 17 September. A couple of weeks later, the group held its inaugural general meeting to elect a governing body and also announced the formation of three subsidiary committees: 1) a Social Committee; 2) a Law Reform Committee; and 3) an Advice and Counsel Committee.

The Social Committee's first venture the following month, and possibly its most successful, was a chicken and champagne picnic attended by a mixed crowd. Forty-eight people are reported to have enjoyed the day although not all of them were gay. In November and December the second annual general meeting and two film nights were held. The first film night, held in the Congregational Church Hall, was attended by 19 and the second by 32. The increased interest in CAMP ACT, however, was short-lived. Around sixty or seventy invitations were sent out to the 20 December Christmas Party but five days prior to the event only two RSVPs had been received. The organisers decided to go ahead with the party although they were worried when by 8pm only six people had shown up. Their risk-taking paid off, however, and by 9.30pm many more had turned up and 'the place was jumping! Well, if you can call a hall filled (?) with about 30 people, jumping?'

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In Canberra at this time, in addition to the risks around being openly homosexual, there was a certain apprehension surrounding CAMP events because they were being held (for financial reasons) in a church hall. Less than six months after its inception membership CAMP ACT numbers remained low:

Memberships have not been terribly encouraging but we sit and wait and hope that perhaps more and more will take heart, hand and join us. We can understand the many reasons why they don’t join; the main reason being that quite a lot of people are public servants who are afraid of losing their jobs … There seems to be an underlying general apathy to all that the ACT group tries to do. Sixty to seventy people are usually contacted about events but literally no-one bothers to reply.\(^{74}\)

Ultimately the combination of fear, hesitancy, and apathy, proved too much for CAMP ACT to overcome and the group slowly stopped making an effort to attract new members to its shrinking ranks, eventually fizzling out altogether some months later.

Aside from being home to Australia’s first homosexual law reform society, and CAMP ACT for a short period, Canberra’s other gay claims to fame are limited. Notable too perhaps was the formation in 1978 of a gay group in the ACT Administrative and Clerical Officers Association (ACOA), the second and third division Public Service Union; and on 21 June 1979 the claim by Community Radio 2XX of a world first with a full day of gay broadcasting.\(^{75}\) Unlike the larger urban centres where the disgruntlement of lesbians in gay liberation surfaced at roughly the same time as that of lesbians in women’s liberation – and because of

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\(^{74}\) Camp Ink, Vol. 2, No. 4, February, 1972, pp. 16-17.

\(^{75}\) The 2XX claim appears in ‘1979: The Year in Review’, Gay Information, No. 1, April, 1980, p. 3.
the limited nature of gay organising there – the evolution of separate lesbian organising and the establishment of a lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra followed a different path. What is interesting is that the exhilaration and positive energy inspired at the Sorrento conference, which was taken back in an abundance to Melbourne, Adelaide and even Sydney, did not appear to make it back to Canberra despite numerous reports that there were women from Canberra present at the conference. The consciousness behind a culture of women-only dances and events didn’t arrive in Canberra until the late 1970s, some five or so years after Australia’s larger cities. A 1979 article, based on a taped conversation between eight Canberra lesbians, revealed that even in the late 1970s it was still hard to meet other lesbians. Based on the women’s observations, Jane Bullen summarised the situation for lesbians in Canberra at that time as follows:

We need to be able to find each other without being shuffled from one welfare phone to another, or simply getting a ‘don’t know’ whether its from a government department, a voluntary agency or the Women’s Centre. It should be easy.

We need to get away from the heterosexual world and its pressures when we want to and be just with each other. And we need to be able to do that not just in private homes, but in other places as well.

We need to be able to feel a limited security (more than that would be kidding ourselves), but not the confining false security of a ghetto – Not the feeling that our horizons are limited to and determined by a group, of whatever size.

In terms of these basics, I wonder how different things really are for lesbians in this city now, to what they were in the sixties.76

One of the women, quoted in Bullen’s article, described how difficult it was earlier in the 1970s for her as a newcomer to Canberra to locate other gay people:

When we were first here I chased up all my usual channels for finding out where gay women meet ... and the reaction from Lifeline was really disgraceful. I rang up three times, and I said: ‘I’m new in Canberra. I’m gay, and I’d like to find out where other gay people meet, because I’m going to get really lonely if I don’t’ and each person said – ‘Oh yes, we’ve got a pamphlet about homosexuality, I’ll just see if I can find it’. And anyway, they couldn’t find it. I rang up again. And they said, ‘Oh, you’d better ring up the Health Commission, they’ve got counsellors, we haven’t got anyone that we can turn to.’ They gave me the number. And I got this really friendly suburban lady who said ‘Oh look, no – we haven’t got anything to do with that – you can come in for counselling if you feel really desperate – there’s a man that works with my husband, and he’s gay – maybe he’d know something. So I got this man’s number then rung him up ... But – it’s really disgraceful – what a roundabout way to find another person who was gay. It was just sheer chance.77

76 Jane Bullen, ‘Canberra: Conversations with Lesbians’, Rouge, No. 3, September, 1979, p. 17.

77 Judy as cited in Bullen, ‘Canberra: Conversations with Lesbians’, p. 16.
Not unusually the bigger cities in Australia have tended to provide a safer more anonymous environment for those confused about, or interested in, exploring non-heterosexual options. Sydney and Melbourne, like San Francisco and New York, provided sexual opportunities and experiences not generally available in either rural or small town Australia.

Figure 13 Early gay liberation protest, Sydney, 1972.

In Australia, whilst the other big cities did offer a certain anonymity in the search for other sexual transgressors, it was in Sydney and to a lesser extent, Melbourne, where thriving if hidden gay sub-cultures existed in the period prior to gay liberation. Unlike America, these sub-cultures were social and not political in nature and were primarily gay male networks. The experiences of gays and lesbians in Australia’s other capital cities, Adelaide, Perth, Darwin, Brisbane, Hobart and Canberra prior to and since the early 1970s, tell a different story and one that has not yet been adequately recorded.78

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78 There exists only one published history of any of these cities, its focus being on male homosexual
‘She Gave Me That Look’ aims to contribute a local history of lesbian (feminist) experiences in Canberra to the field(s) of lesbian and gay (as well as feminist) history in Australia.

A local focus: why Canberra?

Canberra may seem an odd choice for a lesbian history given its apparent lack of either a gay or lesbian sub-culture prior to the 1970s; and its short-lived efforts at gay activist organising in the 1970s. And yet it is these very differences which hold the potential for adding a new dimension to the slow-to-emerge field of gay and lesbian history in Australia. The unique nature of Canberra’s past was not, however, revealed to me until well into the research process. Indeed, my original decision to focus on Canberra eventuated for reasons no different to many historians. ‘Why Sydney?’ asks Craig Johnston in the introduction to his collection of writings about the gay movement, A Sydney Gaze: The Making of Gay Liberation. His answer is simple. ‘I live here’ he writes, ‘I have engaged with its gay subculture and movement much more that with those of other places.’

The question of why researchers and historians choose to research particular locations or subjects often comes down to them being motivated by reasons as straightforward as Johnston’s. This history is no exception. Canberra has been home to me for most of my life and is the geographical location I am most connected to. It was in 1970s Canberra that I began exploring my sexuality with other girls my age; it was in year 11 as a student at Phillip College where my first kiss with another girl (and the ensuing rumours among school peers) witnessed my temporary retreat into the closet and soon after the loss of my heterosexual virginity; and it was in early 1980s Canberra, whilst an undergraduate student at the Australian National University, that I fell in love with another woman who became my first female lover. Part of my motivation for researching and writing this history has to do with wanting to better understand my own experience of coming out by being able to view my own experiences alongside those of others who came to identify as lesbians in Canberra during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s.

I have chosen to include some biographical details about myself in ‘She Gave Me That Look’ as a way of making explicit my role and position in this history. As noted in the

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previous chapter, as the researcher and author I am not an invisible guiding force with no agenda. I am heavily implicated in the project at many levels; as the person who conducted the interviews and the person who chose what would and would not be included in the history. History, like anthropology, has a long tradition of overlooking or denying the impact of the researcher/historian in the production of knowledge. According to anthropologist, Will Roscoe, the ban of self reference and personal reflection in ethnographic writing becomes highly problematic in cases where the ethnographer wants to explicitly include her/himself in their work.\(^{80}\) Although this is an area that has not been adequately theorised by gay and lesbian historians to date, in anthropology it has recently received some critical attention. Published in 1996, *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists*\(^{81}\), problematises the ban on self reference and personal reflection as it relates to the (homo)sexual identity of the researcher/anthropologist/ethnographer who enters the field with the intention of incorporating their sexual identity into their fieldwork. Many of the contributors to *Out in the Field* discuss similar kinds of ethical and methodological issues to those I encountered in my research.

In his article 'Being Gay and Doing Fieldwork', for example, Walter L. Williams describes how being out as a gay man since 1980 has affected his research. Williams' experience has been predominantly positive, the most common response to him acknowledging his own gayness has been an opening up by informants and in one surprising instance, the breaking of a cultural tradition in a culture where homosexuality wasn't usually spoken about to outsiders.\(^{82}\) He writes, 'Over and over in my research, from Alaska to Java, informants have told me that they would never discuss such topics with a heterosexual'.\(^{83}\) I am confident that the information conveyed to me in my interviews was similarly influenced by my sexual identity as a lesbian. I am also aware that several of the narrators would not have agreed to be interviewed had I not been part of Canberra's amorphous lesbian (feminist) community and had they not known me or known of me. Williams' observations seem startlingly obvious, and yet such concepts tend not to be a typical part of the story as


\(^{81}\) Lewin and Leap (eds), *Out in the Field*.

\(^{82}\) Williams does however acknowledge that his experience may be unusual or slightly skewed by the fact that he does consciously research ‘cultures that have a tradition of acceptance of same-sex eroticism’. Walter L. Williams, ‘Being Gay and Doing Fieldwork’ in Lewin and Leap (eds), *Out in the Field*, p. 75.

\(^{83}\) Williams, ‘Being Gay and Doing Fieldwork’, p. 81.
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told by lesbian and gay historians in the west. Those gay and lesbian histories that do include oral narratives don't often acknowledge the influence the historian's sexual identity may have had on the information being procured in any interview-type situations. Yet, the interview situation is a contextual meeting of two individuals and the material which is produced in such a meeting is necessarily a product of who those individuals are, and by how 'honest' they are about themselves. Additionally, the decisions the interviewer makes about how s/he will behave and respond in the interview situation contributes to the sort of information procured. As Williams says:

What I find is that if a person reveals a particularly personal detail, it helps for me to throw in some intimate detail about my own experiences. This simple act makes the interview less of a one-sided probing of informant by researcher.

In ‘She Gave Me That Look’, I have deliberately tried to problematise the researcher/researched dichotomy by including biographical details about myself in the text; by making explicit uncomfortable moments in the interview process; and by highlighting difficulties involved in transcribing and interpreting interviews. Further, the inclusion of my own background in the text adds to the local dimension of this Canberra-based history and allows me to provide points of connection between my experiences and that of the narrators.

I was born in Canberra in 1966, the second child of newly arrived immigrants, the first to be born in Australia. A few years earlier, my parents (and sister) had boarded one of the many UK-originating ships bound for Australia. The early 1960s was a boom period for immigration to Australia with thousands taking advantage of the assisted passage scheme and others taking up an infinite number of nominated government positions. My father was offered a position with the Bureau of Census and Statistics in mid 1962 and in November that year, he, my mother and my nine-month old sister, departed Tilbury Docks in London for Australia. Breaking the six week voyage with

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84 In relation to their research for *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Kennedy and Davis have commented on the ways in which the contemporary lesbian community, which they and their narrators participate in, has affected (mostly positively) their research. See Kennedy and Davis, ‘Constructing an Ethnohistory of the Buffalo Lesbian Community’, p. 177.


86 At the end of World War II, the Australian government embarked on an international immigration scheme aimed at attracting suitable migrants to Australia. Whilst agreements were made with a number of different countries the one most utilised was the one negotiated between the Australian and British governments in March 1946 which became operational in 1947. Negotiated initially as a free passage scheme, in 1955 the 1947 immigration arrangement was replaced with an assisted passage scheme which enabled those eligible to migrate for £10. This substantial migrant group became known more fondly as ‘ten pound poms’.

87 According to figures issued in 1967 by the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, between
stops in Gibraltar, Port Said, Bombay, Penang, Singapore, Fremantle, Adelaide and Melbourne, they disembarked in Sydney in early December. After staying there overnight they made the (then) six hour journey to Canberra by train where they took up temporary residence in the government-operated Acton Hostel.8 A decade later, one of the narrator's, Erin emigrated with her parents as assisted passage migrants to Canberra from Perth, Scotland. It was a decision, says Erin, that dramatically altered their lives. As Erin explains it:

I think my mother would have died if we'd stayed in Britain, her health was so bad. She had absolutely chronic bronchial pneumonia ... She wanted to give me opportunities as well. My father came kicking and screaming. He was dragged to Australia. He's happy now that we came but he wasn't keen at the time.89

Canberra in the 1960s and 1970s was a very different place from the country my parents and Erin's had left behind. Prior to emigrating, Erin's family had been living

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8 A decade later, one of the narrator's, Erin emigrated with her parents as assisted passage migrants to Canberra from Perth, Scotland. It was a decision, says Erin, that dramatically altered their lives. As Erin explains it:

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88 During the course of my postgraduate studies at the ANU, Women's Studies students were, for a time, relocated to the renamed Acton Hostel - now Acton House. At the time it seemed somehow fitting to be researching and writing this history in what potentially could have been the very room my parents and sister lived in for four months upon their arrival in Canberra, Australia.

89 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
in a working-class slum. My mother had grown up in Pwllheli, a small market town on the coast in North Wales with a population of about 3,500 (which remains the same today), whilst my father was from Preston, an industrial mill town in Lancashire in the north of England. Canberra resembled neither one of these places even remotely. It was, according to my mother, 'unlike anything we had ever seen before'. Arriving in Canberra on a drizzly day there was, however, one similarity to the UK that they had not anticipated - despite it being summer, the weather was cold and the surrounding countryside green and lush. Unfortunately, because they had not anticipated either rain or coldness, they had only brought summer clothes with them which were not much use at the Acton Hostel where renovations meant that the dining room was missing an entire wall. In that context, according to my mother, they quickly joined ranks with the other resident 'whinging poms'. My parents recall being impressed by Canberra’s unusual beauty. Both remember, soon after their arrival, my father announcing the fresh air of Canberra as being like ‘champagne in the morning’ when compared to the polluted environs of South London where they had lived immediately prior to immigrating. My mother remembers too that they were astounded by how high the wages were compared to those in England. Generally speaking though, they were not surprised or shocked by Canberra. In part, they said, that was probably because they had read as much as they could about the place before making the decision to immigrate. In my father’s words, ‘we expected Canberra would be a modern city like Brazilia and it was’.  

Canberra figures uneasily in the Australian landscape as neither an urban city nor a country town and as such occupies a unique place in Australia’s lesbian and gay past. It is small and yet nationally important. Home of the national and territory parliaments, armed forces, public services, universities, diplomatic missions and embassies, Canberra is affluent, multicultural and internationally well connected, and yet in many ways, it operates and feels like an insular country town. Since its early days, Canberra has carried with it an unfortunate stigma attached to it being the product of political decision-making. Like Brazilia and Washington DC, Canberra was ‘made deliberately and by plan, and in the conspectus of historical time, almost overnight’.  

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90 Conversation with my parents about their experiences of immigrating to Canberra in the early 1960s, 10 December 2000.

Located 150 kilometres inland from the Pacific Ocean and a little over 300 kilometres south west of Sydney, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) covers 2356 square kilometres (910 square miles) and is situated on and around the flood-plain of the Molonglo River some 570 metres above sea-level. The ACT has been home to Canberra, the national capital of Australia, for only ninety years. The Federal Capital Territory officially came into existence on January 1, 1911 after legislation was passed by both Commonwealth and NSW Parliaments. An international architectural competition for the design of the new national capital drew 137 entrants with the eventual, albeit controversial, winner announced as American landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin.

Central to Burley Griffin’s plan were a series of artificial lakes and a parliamentary triangle in which important national buildings were to be placed. Residential areas, like the rest of the city, were to take advantage of the natural landforms of the territory. Progress was slow in the early years of development, due in part to the first world war. The following ten years saw gradual progress made with the completion of a ‘temporary’ Parliament House (1927), housing for 1,100 public servants, shops built in Civic, Manuka and Kingston and the opening of the Canberra-Queanbeyan railway for passenger traffic (1923).

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93 In September 1915 the Territory was expanded to include a further 28 square miles at Jervis Bay so that it had its own port.


95 In 1963, Lionel Wigmore, in his history of Canberra, The Long View, makes mention of the supposedly legendary story behind Burley Griffin’s win, which gives due credit to the influence of his wife Marian Mahoney. For it was Mahoney, also an architect who, nine weeks before the last possible dispatch date when Burley Griffin was still only toying with the idea of entering the competition, threatened to withdraw her offer to draft his plan unless he began serious work on it immediately. ‘It is’, says Wigmore, ‘another instance of woman’s influence on the course of history, for the Canberra of today might have been a very different city had the Griffin design missed the last mail to reach Australia before the competition closed’ (p. 66).

96 Building operations were in fact entirely suspended between 1917 and 1920 because of the war. See Herbert William Henry King, ‘Factors of Site and Plan’ in White (ed.), Canberra: A Nation’s Capital, p. 217.

97 It was to be a long ‘temporary’, with the new Parliament House not opening until 1988. The design for the new building was once again selected from an international competition which drew 329 entrants worldwide. And again the wishes of the indigenous population were denied in the decision-making process to choose the site for the new building.
Canberra’s population tripled in those first twenty years but it was still little over 10,000 in 1936 and consisted primarily of immigrants from other parts of Australia and abroad. Even in 1947, only 4,824 of Canberra’s 16,900 population were actually born there. From the mid 1950s the city slowly began to take shape and the population continued to climb. In 1964, following the construction of Kings Avenue Bridge (1962) and Commonwealth Bridge (1963), the Molonglo River was dammed to form Lake Burley Griffin. The Civic Centre also saw a growth spurt in the 1960s as new offices, stores, banks, theatres and law courts were built. This period also saw the remaining Commonwealth Public Service departments relocate to Canberra, further increasing the need to develop new residential areas. Between the mid 1950s and the mid 1960s – the period during which my family immigrated to Canberra – the

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99 According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) by 1956 the population of Canberra had climbed quite markedly to reach 35,000. ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 1996.

100 By the early 1940s, with the exception of the Postmaster-General, Civil Aviation, Supply and Shipping, and Defence, all national Public Service departments were located in Canberra. For further details on the transfer of departments from Melbourne to Canberra see Wigmore, The Long View and Pierce William Edward Curtin, ‘The Seat of Government’ in White (ed.), Canberra: A Nation’s Capital.
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The population of the settled ACT has always been predominantly European and has never included more than 1% indigenous inhabitants. My family, and two of the narrators families, Pat’s and Emma’s, moved to Canberra during this period of expansion. Whilst Emma did not provide any details of why her family moved to Canberra from NSW, Pat explained that her family moved from Melbourne to Canberra because of her father’s work with the Supply and Shipping Department which was one of the last public service departments to relocate to the national capital.

The continuing increase in population during the 1960s and 1970s saw the gradual implementation of a new and innovative kind of town planning in Canberra. Instead of increasing the density of the existing city area, Canberra was planned around the concept of a number of interconnected yet largely independent satellite towns which together make up the capital city. The original aim of such satellite planning was to cut down on the urban congestion found in most large cities and as such it has been successfully implemented in the design and building of Canberra. The satellite towns, Woden Valley/Weston Creek, Belconnen, Tuggeranong, Gungahlin and the original city centre are linked by a transportation system of roads and cycleways, yet each one has been designed to be largely self-sufficient for its given population in terms of employment, retail centres, entertainment and transportation. Two of the narrators moved to the new satellite town of Belconnen. In 1967, after three years of living abroad, Teresa and her family were among the first 100 households to there; and a few years later, Erin and her parents also settled in Melba, one of the new Belconnen suburbs. It was, she says, a very different environment to Perth, Scotland, where they had lived prior to migrating to Australia as ‘ten pound poms’.

101 Whilst it is important to take into account that it has only been since 1961 that ABS census data has included full-blooded Aborigines, this fact alone - given that the indigenous population at its highest has never topped the 1% mark in Canberra - can at best be considered only marginally responsible for the increase in Canberra’s population between 1956 and 1966. ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 1996.

102 This figure is based on data from the ABS and includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. In actual numbers the 1996 Census of Population and Housing estimated that the Indigenous population of the ACT was 2,952. It is a startlingly low number alongside that of New South Wales (106,294) and Queensland (100,504) where the indigenous population is estimated to be closer to 28%. Out of all of the states and territories the ACT has by far the lowest percentage of indigenous peoples making up its population. In terms of figures, the next lowest state is Tasmania where there are an estimated 14,651 indigenous residents making up 3.9% of the population, as compared to the ACT’s 0.8%. According to the ABS 1996 census, whilst the majority of the Australian population is born in Australia, a little less than a quarter are still born elsewhere. The most frequent other places of birth are still the UK (including Northern Ireland) and the Republic of Ireland followed in order by New Zealand, Italy, the Former Yugoslav Republic, Vietnam, Greece, Germany, China, Hong Kong, the Netherlands and the Philippines. This national estimate is reflected in the makeup of Canberra’s population.
Despite its escalating growth in population throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Canberra was maligned by many - as it had been since 1911 - as an artificial, sterile, unnaturally clean and parochial backwater. To immigrants like Erin’s family and mine, however, the clean fresh air and newness of Canberra could only ever be positive attributes when compared to the Britain they had left behind. The negative rumours attitudes towards Canberra, nonetheless, persisted amongst Australians, heterosexual and homosexual alike, and particularly by those residing in the more cosmopolitan cities of Sydney and Melbourne. Many of those who attended the Eighth Lesbian and Homosexual Conference, held for the first time since its inception in Canberra in 1982, had not escaped the rumours about Canberra and were to complain bitterly (but humorously) about the conference location. In the words of Sydney-sider, Sasha Soldatow:

I arrived in Canberra for the Ho[mosexual] Co[nference] on Thursday and hated the place. Canberra is a hole. Pretty but lifeless. It is a place to go to only if you have a purpose. The conference didn’t seem to be enough. A taxi driver quoted me $100 to drive me back to Sydney - I was tempted.103

Sheril Berkovitch from Melbourne similarly quipped at the end of her conference review: ‘I tried not to believe everything they told me about Canberra but it is true! Have you ever tried buying tampons there at 3am on a Sunday?’104

Internationally, Canberra was also little known, with many believing Sydney to be the nation’s capital. It has been suggested that Canberra’s unique beginnings may be responsible for its less than positive reputation. In an article written in 1954, geographer Oskar Spate made the point that whilst all cities in some sense are the artificial result of conscious human activity, in the case of Canberra, this artificiality was compounded by the fact that the city was planned for political reasons rather than in response to a ‘real’ need, as in the mining towns of Broken Hill and Mt. Isa or the farming requirements in the Goulburn area.105 The combination of political motivation and conscious planning, as suggested by Spate, seem likely to have contributed to the constant deprecation of Canberra and the constant turnover in population.

Never quite a country town, and for a long time, not quite a city, Canberra’s artificial beginnings contributed to it being a place with no real roots or a sense of past. Until recently the constantly changing population served to create a feeling of

impermanence for inhabitants and visitors alike. Canberra was a place where you got posted, did your time in purgatory and then returned home. Each of the eight narrators came to be living in Canberra for varying reasons. As a random grouping in this context, their movements indicate the fluctuating nature of the population. Of the eight narrators, Teresa was the only one actually born in Canberra and even she didn’t spend her whole childhood living there as her family lived abroad for three years in the mid 1960s. Although Leigh was born in neighbouring Queanbeyan in 1953, her family moved to Canberra shortly after she was born where they remained permanently. Jocelyn was born in Newcastle, NSW, in 1960. Her family moved to Canberra for three years when she was three after which time she lived variously in the Phillippines, Thailand and Canberra until she was twelve when she attended Canberra Girls Grammar as a boarder. After finishing school Jocelyn travelled overseas before returning to Canberra to attend university. Kate and Dee both moved to Canberra as adults. Kate was born in Sydney in 1955 and moved to Canberra in 1973 to attend university. Dee was born in Raymond Terrace, NSW, in 1953, and moved to Canberra with her husband and children in 1980. As mentioned earlier, Pat and Emma moved to Canberra with their families in the mid-to-late-1960s and Erin emigrated there in 1973 with her parents.

We can speculate that a percentage of Canberra’s population has almost certainly been gay and lesbian but because of the constantly changing population such speculation is difficult, if not impossible, to verify. And the task gets even more difficult without a history of homophile organising to trace, or a readily identifiable and continuing pub/bar culture to turn to. In 1970s Canberra, the fact that gay liberation never actually took off tends to support D’Emilio’s argument that the creation of mass movements does not actually happen overnight requiring as they do a more substantial foundation than the coming together of isolated individuals who share a common oppression. Lesbians and gays in Canberra never marched through the streets waving gay liberation banners although it is likely that many of them were aware of the existence of a Gay Liberation Movement in other cities.

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106 The only documentary evidence I have found about this period is in a 1972 article, which contains information about Canberra’s beats, police raids and arrests in the 1960s and 1970s. See Paul Hartigan, ‘Camp Cops and Robbers’, Camp Ink, Vol. 2, No. 7, May, 1972, pp. 8-9.

In a paper delivered at the 6th National Conference for Lesbians and Homosexual Men in 1980, Gay Walsh provided a less than optimistic picture of the current state of the Australian gay movement. According to Walsh, while Sydney had been home since 1973 to a vibrant and effective movement, by the end of the decade it had dwindled to ‘the beating of a few desperate wings’. In Sydney and further afield, she says:

Activist or political gay groups have fractured, disintegrated or disappeared. In Queensland, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and South Australia there is, to date, no organised movement ... In Western Australia, the Perth movement is largely composed of male homosexuals; whilst lesbians are working in the women’s movement. In Hobart, Alice Springs, Darwin, Brisbane and Townsville lesbians are active in the organisations of the women’s movement. Male homosexual activity is absent in these centres.108

Walsh’s main argument was that the National Conference, by standing in as a substitute for a national organisation, has ultimately been detrimental to gay liberation in Australia. Her main point may well be valid but what interests me more here is the fact that she completely neglects to include Canberra in her ‘nationwide’ summary of the movement. Whilst this may well have been an oversight on her behalf, it is likely to have been an oversight with good reason – because there weren’t any significant gay organisations or actions in Canberra in the 1970s. As Kate, one of the narrators, remembers it:

I didn’t know of any gay liberation things in Canberra and I don’t think I knew of any gay men either – so it was all a bit removed from my existence ... I don’t know if there was any gay liberation in Canberra at that point.109

Similarly, Leigh says, ‘If there was a group called “Gay Liberation” I didn’t hear about it!’110 And another of the narrators, Emma, who vividly remembers the emergence of gay liberation in America, and then Sydney, has no recollection of it existing in Canberra:

I certainly remember the Stonewall thing happening. I think that was in ‘69. Um, and I remember that filtering through over here and it being a really big deal but because there wasn’t (pause) I really wasn’t in a particular political group. I mean, we all felt that we were getting on fine anyway and certainly none of us wanted to march on the streets publicly ... Well, no-one that I knew and I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to either ‘cause you would just be too worried about the repercussions.111
Figure 16 This was perhaps the only time a ‘homosexual’ banner was carried in a protest in Canberra in the 1970s. Sadly, it was held by the Canberra Citizens for Freedom Association as they heckled the Vietnam Moratorium march towards Parliament, 19 September 1970.

The lack of gay and lesbian activist organising in Canberra in the 1960s and 1970s can readily be understood as a consequence of its fluctuating and changing population as well as a reflection of its small town sensibilities. Very few small towns, or rural areas, were instrumental sites for any of the protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Additionally, that Canberra was home to most of the Commonwealth Public Service departments may have contributed to creating a more conservative white collar environment less likely than larger urban centres to provide the variety of stimulus necessary to the growth of revolutionary movements. It is something of a conundrum then, that women’s liberation took Canberra by storm. Women’s liberationist, Lorraine Merrony, cast some light on the specific situation of women in Canberra in her 1971 paper titled ‘Women in Canberra’. She explains:

In Canberra, women are in an almost unique situation. Most of us have come to Canberra from other cities and States, where we have had family ties and quite a large circle of friends ... All of a sudden we are uprooted by distance from friends and family and [are] very isolated.112

PART I. HISTORIOGRAPHY, METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

After the initial flurry of activity to settle her family into a new home, her husband into a new job and her children into new schools, many relocated wives suddenly find themselves house-bound and lonely in a strange, new place, says Merrony. The sense of isolation of women in the suburbs that Merrony points to here has been well documented as having existed in the 1950s and early 1960s in America, perhaps most memorably by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. Whilst such isolation and loneliness was undoubtedly experienced by women throughout Australia, perhaps in Canberra’s case the situation was magnified because of the relocation of so many families, the sudden absence of accessible networks of family and friends resulting in a crisis for many. Merrony speculates on what may have been going on in the minds of women in such a situation:

> For a great many women who have unconsciously conformed to the rosy feminine image it is extremely shattering to come at 25 or 30 to the slow realization that housework and family is simply not enough. Marriage and parenthood can be a joyous part of life, but not the whole of it – what happens now? Canberra has a vigorous, growing atmosphere – what can you ever achieve or contribute. It’s a time of painful questioning and reassessment.

Another woman, referred to as ‘Mrs X’ in a 1970 newspaper article described how lonely and isolated she felt after her husband walked out on her. Women who found themselves in her position tended to say they were widows rather than deserted wives, she said, because ‘in Canberra you find the attitude that the divorcee is flighty and not terribly stable and that a deserted wife must be lacking’. In 1970s Canberra the high number of young relocated wives and ‘deserted wives’ in the relatively small, mostly middle class, population may well have provided a very fertile ground for the emergence of women’s liberation. Perhaps also, in 1970s Canberra, the demands of women’s liberation were a far less confronting proposition than gay rights for both its proponents and the population more generally? It is interesting also to note that although Canberra was the site for Australia’s first politically-oriented homosexual organisation, the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS), its founders were homosexual supporters rather than homosexuals themselves. The existence in Canberra of a strong Women’s Liberation Movement, and a negligible Gay Liberation Movement, created a unique situation, which had consequences for lesbians both

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within, and outside of, feminist organising during and after the movement’s formative years. The residual impact of the women’s movement on those women who came to feminism and/or lesbianism in Canberra after the initial fervour of women’s liberation had passed is explored via the personal experiences of the eight narrators in Part III. But prior to that, in the chapters that follow, I include a history of the formative years of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Canberra, for it was this movement, more than any other one thing, that enabled a lesbian feminist community to emerge there.
PART II

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LESBIAN (FEMINIST) COMMUNITY IN CANBERRA
Chapter Three

Women’s liberation in Canberra – the early years

In the closing months of 1993 interested Canberra women were invited to a series of meetings to decide whether it was worth trying to keep the Lobelia Street women’s centre functioning. Very few women attended and because of the apparent lack of concern about the centre’s future it was decided to close it down, to disband the house, and to cease publishing *Wimminews*, the centre’s newsletter. The last issue of *Wimminews* was published in January 1994 and it was there that the editors regretfully announced the demise of the newsletter and the women’s centre:

> We hear a lot about how times change and how wmn’s focus changes. We hear that the House itself is dingy and under-utilised. But the Women’s Centre Incorporated is, or rather was more than just an old govie [government] house ... More than twenty years ago there was a small band of wmn who, without government support, using only their own resources and strong commitment to the Women’s Liberation Movement, got the House, got incorporated and got a newsletter going. In the 80’s we lost the word ‘Liberation’ and in the 90’s we have lost the ‘movement’. The ultimate irony will be that lack of time, concern and energy will mean that it all fades away and that sometime in the future, in a less than benign environment, it will all have to be done again!1

The news that the women’s centre and *Wimminews* no longer existed shocked the slumbering Canberra feminist community into action. It was too late to resuscitate

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1 'A Letter From The Editors', *Wimminews*, January, 1994, cover page.
PART II. TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LESBIAN (FEMINIST) COMMUNITY IN CANBERRA

either Lobelia Street or Wimminews but it wasn’t too late to rally together to organise a replacement publication.

On 8 February 1994 over fifty women attended a meeting (and a further thirty sent apologies) organised by three concerned subscribers of the defunct Wimminews. As a result of that meeting a trial edition of Capital Women: Canberra Girls’ Own Monthly was launched the following month on International Women’s Day (8 March). Capital Women continues to be published today and whilst some of its current subscribers may remember its predecessor, Wimminews, some would never have heard of it. What interests me here is how quickly and thoroughly the recent past can be forgotten. At the 8 February meeting, for example, there was no mention of the time before Lobelia Street, of the time before Wimminews. It was as though neither one had predecessors. Lobelia Street and Wimminews alone represented our feminist past.

The (lesbian) feminist community that existed in Canberra in 1994 - and to which the eight narrators I interviewed belonged - had relied on Wimminews since the late 1970s to provide ‘a central platform for all wmn’s groups, for all wmn’s activities, for discussion and argument and conversation and entertainment and a launching pad for great ideas and for political action’. But how was it that Wimminews came to exist? Like the Gay Liberation Movement, it didn’t spring into existence overnight. In the period prior to its emergence there lies an unspoken history. In the final issue of Wimminews the editors do mention the existence of ‘a small band of wmn ... more than twenty years ago’ but there is no explicit reference to the publication which preceded Wimminews as Canberra’s first women’s liberation newsletter, nor Canberra’s first women’s house in Bremer Street.

In the eight years preceding the publication of the first edition of Wimminews (May 1978) many women had in fact devoted their time and energy to establishing and maintaining women’s liberation in Canberra. It is largely on their shoulders that the lesbian (feminist) community that existed from the late 1970s to the early 1990s rests. The apparent absence of this knowledge in the mid 1990s indicates just how quickly

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2 Although the decision to ‘replace’ Wimminews was made at that meeting there was no consensus on what the replacement newsletter would be and as such a few different groups of women began meeting with the aim of starting a new newsletter. One of the unresolved discussions at the meeting had concerned the issue of why it was that Wimminews had not had a title that more explicitly reflected its predominantly lesbian readership. One of the groups that met several times with the intention of starting a new newsletter (and which I was involved with) had as a basic premise that it would be an explicitly lesbian publication but like many grand lesbian (feminist) ideas the newsletter never got beyond the idea stage and another group of women hit the stands in record time with Capital Women, a publication which lost many of its old readership but which still caters to a significant lesbian readership.

aspects of the recent feminist past can be forgotten or lost but, although important, that is not my main focus here. For whilst local histories of feminist activism do need to be written, so too do the histories of those later involved in, or affected by, involvement in feminist pursuits. In this history I do include two chapters on the early years of women’s liberation in Canberra but I do so because this past was integral to the development and emergence of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community which the narrators and myself belonged in 1994, the year I conducted the interviews. It is debatable as to whether or not any such community continues to exist today or whether the death throes as speculated on by the Wimminews editors were in fact accurate. A number of the narrators had negative things to say about the state of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community in 1994. Their comments are perhaps best summed up in the words of Emma who said: ‘I get amused when I hear the words like ‘the lesbian community’ because I don’t know what that means ... and I don’t know where it is’. If 1994 (or thereabouts) was witness to the dissolution of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community, this history and others like it become even more important as the record(s) of a specific lesbian feminist period.

In this chapter and the one that follows, I have documented the first ten years of women’s liberation in Canberra. I have documented only the first decade for a series of overlapping and complex reasons. Firstly, and perhaps most simply, I want to provide a feminist context against which it is possible to foreground the narratives of the eight women, which appear in Chapters Five and Six. Secondly, it is highly debatable as to whether women’s liberation as such still existed in Canberra in the 1980s or whether it had evolved into something much messier and harder for the historian to define. If, as the editors of Wimminews suggest, the ‘liberation’ aspect of the movement was dropped in the 1980s, taking this localised history women’s liberation much beyond 1979 becomes an impossibly complex task. Thirdly, and interconnectedly, it was women’s liberation that provided the foundations for Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community to emerge from.

In this chapter instead of focusing primarily on the gains and successes of the movement, I have chosen to structure this history around the day-to-day existence of women’s liberation in Canberra with an emphasis on lesbian issues as they arose and

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4 This amnesia is not specific to Canberra - in Sydney, for example, in a short history of Women’s Liberation House written in 1979 existing members of the house collective admitted that they were ‘not too sure of the history of the house’ between 1969 and 1974. ‘Women’s Liberation House: A Potted History’, handout, 1979.

5 Interview with Emma, 8 March, 1994.
were dealt with in the movement. The resulting history is biased in a lesbian direction and claims only to be a limited or partial account of feminist activity in Canberra. My intention in choosing this focus is not meant to imply that women's liberation had no concrete successes in Canberra, but is rather to shift the focus away from the achievements of the movement to its evolvement, maintenance and continuance. I do not wish to deny the very real sense of achievement that resulted when gains were made but want rather to explore the social and practical base from which the political work was done. It was this base that provided a sense of community beyond activism, out of which Canberra's lesbian (feminist) community emerged.

Out in the suburbs: from private to public

In June 1970 a small group of women began meeting at each other's homes in the suburbs of Canberra. They called themselves women's liberationists and were one of many such women's liberation groups to set up throughout Australia in the early 1970s. I do not mean to imply that other groups of politically motivated women did not meet in Canberra prior to this time or indeed following the emergence of women's liberation; the Country Women's Association (CWA) of Canberra, for example, was very active in the region, meeting regularly both prior to, and after, the emergence of the Canberra women's liberation group. In November 1970, several months after the Canberra women's liberation group had formed, the CWA organised for a deputation to voice their concerns about the high cost and dubious quality of ready-to-wear fashions at the federal convention of the Women's and Children's Fashion Industries of Australia held at the Canberra Rex Hotel.6

And earlier in the month at the national symposium of the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, a Mrs Crisp, spoke on the difficulties

6 As reported in The Canberra Times, 24 November, 1970, p. 16.
women faced in having to convince prospective employers of their commitment to the job. From a male employer’s perspective women were not good risks, according to Crisp, because:

A woman, if she is young and attractive [is] expected to marry; if already married, she [is] expected to become pregnant; if she already has children, they could be a tie; if her children are grown up she is too old; and if she has never married and is middle-aged, then she might be temperamental.7

After outlining and critiquing the limited life choices available to women, Crisp admitted that she could understand why an employer would choose a promising male applicant over a woman with the same qualification. She then spoke out against ‘the antics of movements like the Women’s Liberation Front’ which she declared were ‘a form of rather ridiculous exhibitionism’.8 She indicated that the way forward was for individual women to take more responsibility for their choices and to grasp opportunities when they appeared.

The initial Canberra women’s liberation group was a quite different proposition to both the Business and Professional Women’s Club (BPWC) and the CWA, inspired as it was by the Sydney Women’s Liberation Movement.

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Once upon a time, there were a lot of separate women, living in their separate houses and working at separate jobs, who were upset, all on their own, about their private problems. Then, one day, they started talking to each other.

soon, they discovered that their private problems were all much the same. It made sense that if the problems were all so similar, there must have been some common things causing them. This was quite a cheerful thing to find out. It meant that the women were not just silly or hung up unreasonable or bitchy, funny or neurotic, but that they all shared a very uncomfortable situation.

It became obvious that one woman on her own can’t make much difference to this situation, but that a lot of women together can make big changes.

Figure 20 ‘What is women’s liberation?’ Adelaide Women’s Liberation handout, c. 1972.
PART II. TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LESBIAN (FEMINIST) COMMUNITY IN CANBERRA

Sydney women's liberationists had met informally for the first time in December 1969 making them the first known women's liberationists in Australia.9 Following the return of several women from America in 1969, the Sydney women's liberation group10 had formed in response to a general dissatisfaction about the oppression of women.11 Many of the Sydney women, like many of their American sisters, were also keen to organise separately because of the way they had been treated within existing left groups. One of the early aims of the Sydney group was to spread the word about women's liberation throughout Australia, so when the Labor Club at the Australian National University (ANU) invited them to Canberra to speak they didn't hesitate to accept. Their talk, on 6 June 1970, was enthusiastically received by many women involved with the campus-based Left12 and shortly thereafter the Canberra group began meeting regularly. Susan Magarey, an early member of the Canberra women's liberation group, recalls the fervent political agenda of those initial days. 'We saw ourselves as feminist revolutionaries,' she says, 'committed ultimately to the total transformation of our whole society, indeed of all societies'.13 The feminist fever spread across Australia and by early 1971, in addition to the Canberra group, there were at least 'six in Sydney, several in Melbourne, one each in Adelaide, Brisbane, Wollongong, Newcastle, Hobart and Perth'.14

The original women's liberation group in Canberra was not large, consisting of about fifteen women.15 According to Anne Hooper's unpublished research, the initial group

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12 Hooper, 'The Emergence of Contemporary Feminist Groups in Australia', p. 46.
13 Susan Magarey (Eade) as cited in Patricia Grimshaw, 'Only the Chains have Changed' in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), Staining the Wattle. A People's History of Australia since 1788, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1988, p. 84.
15 'General Information about Canberra Women's Liberation: a handout', Canberra Women's Liberation leaflet, p. 1. I have listed the names of the women I have been able to ascertain were part of it in Appendix E. Pat Grimshaw's account of Canberra WL suggests that there were more women involved at its inception. She maintains that '[t]he Canberra feminist group ... began in 1970 with about twenty or
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of women were mostly middle class, and well educated\(^{16}\) (and given the make up of Canberra’s population at the time, probably of Anglo heritage); many of them were in some way connected to the ANU as lecturers, tutors or post graduate students or else worked as teachers or librarians; most were married and of them many also had young children; the age range of the group spanned from those in their early twenties to those in their forties.\(^{17}\)

During the Canberra group’s early months the women were ‘anxious not to attract publicity’ preferring at that stage to ‘talk, read, write, and work out the facts and the arguments’.\(^{18}\) They aspired to be able to ‘help women to recognize the extent of their continuing subordination, so that they [might] free themselves from it’ and beyond that ‘to confer upon society the immense benefit it will receive from ceasing to regard half its number as incapable and second rate’.\(^{19}\) The Canberra women’s liberation group’s first stated objectives decreed that the time has come for:

- Recognition that women are individuals first and members of a sex second
- Equal payment for work performed by members of either sex
- Equal opportunities for work regardless of its nature or the sex of the worker
- Reform of those features of the education system which cause intellectual and occupational differentiation according to sex
- Recognition that the domestic role of married women in our society is that of a submerged, unpaid labour force.\(^{20}\)

Having sufficiently worked out their aims and objectives, in the latter part of 1970 the Canberra women embarked on a campaign to establish a public profile for women’s liberation in the local region. They spoke to the senior boys at Daramalan College about women’s liberation; confronted pro-lifer Alan Fitzgerald about his views on abortion on his 2CA radio program; and on 11 September 1970 appeared on ABC television to talk about the aims and objectives of the movement. In response to the mostly positive

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\(^{16}\) According to Aboriginal activist and feminist, Pat Eatock, the group’s make-up as middle-class and educated continued beyond its formative months. Eatock adds ‘articulate’ to the list when describing her involvement in the Canberra movement around 1972. See Pat Eatock, ‘There’s a Snake in My Caravan’ in Scutt (ed.), \textit{Different Lives}, pp. 27-8.

\(^{17}\) Hooper, ‘The Emergence of Contemporary Feminist Groups in Australia’, pp. 49-50.


\(^{19}\) Canberra Women’s Liberation handout, undated, c. 1970.

\(^{20}\) Canberra Women’s Liberation handout, undated, c. 1970.
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and inquisitive community reactions these media appearances inspired, the group also organised a public meeting at the Griffin Centre to discuss the case for women's liberation which took place on 4 November 1970.21

The November meeting was well attended despite the presence of members of the Anti-Women's Liberation Movement outside the Griffin Centre. Of the 130 people who attended the meeting, a fifth of whom were men, only six were known to be 'anti-Women's Lib' amongst them radio presenter and *Canberra Times* columnist, Alan Fitzgerald. Sitting at the back of the packed hall, Fitzgerald managed to contain himself for the first two hours of the meeting at which time he interjected the proceedings by asking the 'Madam Chairwoman' whether 'the panel's denigration of the role of woman as a sex object would not carry more weight if even one of the panel was a passable sex object' 22. In the hushed and icy quiet that preceded cries of 'Male Chauvinist' and 'You're no oil painting yourself' Fitzgerald decided the time had come to beat a hasty retreat. In his words 'there was a lynching in the air'.23

![Figure 21 Anti-Women's Liberation Movement members demonstrate outside Canberra's first public Women's Liberation Movement meeting on the 4th November, 1970.](image)

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23 Alan Fitzgerald, 'Show of strength by “weaker sex”', p. 3.
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Fitzgerald’s unsympathetic report of the meeting was the only coverage afforded it by The Canberra Times although in the following weeks three ‘Letters to the Editor’ taking issue with Fitzgerald’s report were published. All three referred in some way to his ‘melodramatic report of a calmly argued discussion’.

Figure 22  Beryl Henderson opens Canberra Women’s Refuge, 1975.

In an attempt to redress the damage done by Fitzgerald, J. H. Slatyer outlined the main points of the meeting as follows:

Society must come to grips with the fact that many of its women live in quiet desperation, locked up in the suburbs, lonely, stultified, gradually losing whatever self-confidence they once had.

To encourage a more positive approach to life, we need to have many more part-time jobs available. We need jobs with equal pay, equal security, and equal prospects of promotion.

We need children’s creches run at the highest standard the nation can afford. We need birth control clinics and abortion without guilt. We need to see that as many girls as boys finish high school, and that pregnant girls do not drop out.

And we need to see an end to the situation where women compete with one another as sex objects with men as the quarry.

Of course we like to look as attractive as we can, but at present, many women are so vulnerable, so insecure, and frightened of losing their husbands, that they feel

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unable to offer the hospitality of their homes to deserted, widowed, or divorced friends.27

In the period immediately following the public forum, and despite the best efforts of the ‘Anti-Women’s Liberationists’ and Alan Fitzgerald to ‘show the movement in the worst possible light’28, women’s liberation meetings were flooded with enthusiastic new faces, and it was found necessary to hold separate North and South meetings to accommodate the sudden explosion in numbers.29 A leaflet produced by the Canberra women’s liberation group noted the positive impact that the November meeting had had on the Canberra movement: ‘Since putting ourselves on the map in this way, we have never had a meeting without new faces – it’s a growing movement in a very real sense’.30 Another public forum was held in April 1971, this time on the Southside at the Hughes Community Centre. Many of the ninety who attended the forum were so inspired by the speakers and the ensuing discussion, that once again a new influx of women began attending meetings.

The range of issues the Canberra movement attempted to cover in its initial years was staggering. They met to talk about apartheid, childcare, education, the family, sex, female sexuality, working women, marriage, contraception, birth control, abortion, sex education, sexist advertising and trade unionism. These gatherings ranged from the completely unstructured to a more formal structure where discussion followed the delivery of a paper by one of the members on a particular topic or was structured around a specific book. During the 1970-72 period the Canberra women’s liberationists read and discussed: Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*31, Robin Morgan’s edited collection *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, Juliet Mitchell’s *Woman’s Estate*, Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.32 The March 1972 newsletter also advertises an adult education course run by the

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29 The Northside meetings were to be held at 30 Canning St. Ainslie and the Southside meetings at 19 Bisdee St. Hughes - these were the private residences of members. See *Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter*, November, 1970, p.1.
31 Greer’s book is estimated to have sold over 90,000 copies in paperback in its first three months in Australia. *National Times*, October 18-23, 1971, p. 25.
ANU Centre for Continuing Education called ‘Women in Literature’ which states its objective as being to ‘analyse novels to gain insights into the situation of middle class women as it has evolved during the 19th and 20th centuries’.\(^{33}\) The books to be discussed in the course included Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*.\(^{34}\)


During the movement’s early years, women’s liberationists in Canberra spent a lot of time reading, discussing and writing about women’s oppression but this was not the sole focus and extent of their activities. They were also dedicated to spreading the

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\(^{33}\) *Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter*, March, 1972, p. 2. The Centre for Continuing Education also offered a course called ‘Women in Society’ which looked at the role of women in modern society. The full impact that these courses had on those who attended (and those around them) is difficult to ascertain, but it should not be underestimated. Liz Ross, writing retrospectively, says that the ‘Women in Society’ course exposed her to more complex ideas about Women’s Liberation, introduced her to the notion of Gay Liberation, and marked her entrance into the world of collective political action. See Liz Ross, ‘Escaping the Well of Loneliness’ in Burgmann and Lee (eds), *Staining the Wattle*, p. 101.

\(^{34}\) Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Penguin, Great Britain, 1986; Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Corgi Books, London, 1968; Millet, *Sexual Politics*. It is interesting to speculate as to how and why Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* came to be included in a course being run in 1972 given that the book had been out of print for 180 years at the time and was not issued in reprint for another three years in 1975. How was it that Australian women had even heard of Wollstonecraft’s book in the early 1970s? Anne Summers maintains that Australian suffragettes, by means of overseas contact, were reading John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft at the turn of the century. Can we trace the 1972 reading of Wollstonecraft by women’s liberationists in Australia directly back to first wave feminism within our own shores or was her introduction the result of international feminist networking? Or does this reading rather support Marilyn Lake’s contention that feminist activity did not exist in two waves in Australia but has a continuous presence throughout the century? The fact that Simone de Beauvoir makes mention of Wollstonecraft, as well as Sappho, Christine de Pisan and Olympe de Gouges, in her widely acclaimed *Second Sex* could also be partially responsible for why Wollstonecraft was thus reclaimed by second wave feminists. It may also be worth considering whether the strong connection between communism and feminism in Australia was responsible for the reclamation of some of these figures and texts. See Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1975, p. 359; Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999; de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 159.

word about the inequality of the sexes and women’s position in society as well as learning how to enjoy themselves in each other’s company (without the company of men). They began 1972 with a long-weekend gathering at Guthega from the 28th to the 30th of January. Attended by about forty women, it was the first of its kind for the Canberra movement, and was considered a huge success; for many women it was the first time they had been in a women-only environment for an extended period. These initial instances of separation from men in the early 1970s were critical to the growth of the women’s movement in Australia in much the same way as they had been a few years earlier to their American counterparts. ‘Getting to know each other with no men present … that was the big thing’, says one woman of the time, ‘we could just be women, no matter who our husbands thought we were’. Lyn Harasymiw’s impression of the Guthega was similarly impassioned:

For me, the Guthega weekend was not only an interesting discussion time on WL issues but also an important emotional experience. As women I felt that we did establish a real identification with each other, and that this identification is vital for a sense of group strength which will enable us, as a minority group in this society, to achieve something in action … we must certainly institute regular retreats of this nature. And a retreat it was, because the contrast certainly hit me on arriving back in Canberra.37

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Jenny O. and Julia M.'s later report of the weekend also describes the high level of excitement of the women-only event and additionally indicates the feminist concerns of the Canberra women during this period:

We talked about being a middle-class movement, Shulamith Firestone’s book, the history of feminism in China, America and Australia. Some people walked further than ever before; others wandered through fields of flowers. Some stayed up all night every night. On Saturday night we drank and danced, evicted some male gatecrashers, broke into groups to write songs, verses and sketches, which we then performed. At the end many who had not known each other before, left with a great understanding. Sisterhood was rife!

A pivotal event happened in February 1972, when after almost two years of meeting weekly in private homes, the Canberra women’s liberation group arranged to rent a private residence – 12 Bremer Street, Griffith. The women were ecstatic to have found a permanent home for Canberra’s growing movement:

The hopeless search for a commodious, well-appointed, centrally situated, gracious residence at $30.00 a week has ended with us finding a commodious, comfortable, welcoming, furnished, gracious residence in a pleasant, easy to tend garden for $30.00 a week ... If you find this hard to believe, so does the House Sub-Committee, to say nothing of Eileen (‘To me it just seems too good to be true!’) Haley and Ros (‘It’s just fabulous’) Lamb, who will be living there to keep us all in control.

‘Bremer Street’ was a two-bedroom house with an L-shaped living room, a kitchen, laundry, bathroom as well as a back verandah and a large garden. It also had a garage, which functioned as a workshop space. The rent was paid by the women who used it via pledges and contributions collected at meetings. It was in the new women’s centre that women’s liberation in Canberra really took off. Pat Eatock recalls the atmosphere at Bremer Street in 1972:

Hardly an evening passed without some sort of meeting, with twenty to sixty women. Consciousness-raising [CR] was a twice-weekly event. General meetings,
action groups, and the embryonic Women’s Electoral Lobby had a weekly time and space. Days were filled with the comings and goings of newsletter production, the preparation of leaflets, classes in screen printing, the establishment of the feminist library, or just dropping in.43

The large numbers of women attending meetings, sometimes as many as fifty, led to meetings being split up and contributed to the emergence of a variety of new and different groups. By April, that first year, there were action workshops on Mondays; general meetings, discussions and papers on Wednesdays; Rap Sessions on Thursdays; and additional groups meeting irregularly on the remaining days. With no more than twenty women attending individual meetings, the over-crowding problem ceased and the new divisions were considered a success.

In March, to celebrate International Women’s Day (IWD), which coincidentally fell on Canberra Day (8 March), women’s liberation group members decided to join the Canberra Day stall holders in Civic Square. The women’s liberation stall was very successful, doing a roaring trade in Mejane’s;44 posters (silk-screened in the Bremer Street workshop), t-shirts, shoulder bags, pamphlets, books and badges, and making about $159 for the Centre. As well as the stall, a platform was set up in Petrie Plaza where plays, songs, choruses and speeches were performed to appreciative audiences:

We have presented ourselves to the Canberra public with theatre and speeches before, but this was by far our biggest undertaking. The remarkable thing was that it not only got off the ground but soared.45

The success of the IWD venture in 1972 led to a regular stall being set up in Civic on Friday evenings (late night shopping in Canberra) as a way to keep women’s liberation accessible and in public view.

In May 1972 the ACT branch of the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) was established46 and began meeting regularly at the women’s centre. Shortly thereafter, WEL-ACT and

lives. ‘What is Women’s Liberation?’ Adelaide Women’s Liberation, handout, c. 1972, p. 3.

43 Eatock, ‘There’s a Snake in My Caravan’, p. 25.

44 Mejane was Australia’s first Women’s Liberation newspaper. Based in Sydney, the first issue was published in March 1971.

45 Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, April, 1972, p. 3.

46 In February 1972 Beatrice Faust met with ten other women in her Melbourne home to discuss the forthcoming Federal election in December. Following America’s lead, they decided to survey election candidates on issues of particular concern to women. Their initial postal survey of sitting members was not taken very seriously by the majority of MPs but the few responses that were returned saw publication in a national news magazine which helped to publicise WEL’s existence. WEL numbers had doubled by its second meeting and reached 130 by the third. See ‘WEL Australia – How WEL began’, 1990, http://www.pcug.org.au/other/wel/history.htm Interest in a more structured approach to Women’s Liberation was increasing and on May 3 Beatrice Faust was scheduled to give a talk to interested persons in Canberra Women’s Liberation on the ideas behind the Women’s Electoral Lobby.
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the Canberra women’s liberation group embarked on several joint ventures and a number of different feminist groups emerged. Many of the groups developed autonomous identities, amongst them: the Abortion Counselling Service (ACS); the Child Care Collective; the Women’s Refuge; the Women’s Health Group; the Women’s Information Service (WIS); and the Feminist Education Group.47

During the year as well as the usual gatherings, a number of other pivotal meetings took place. Family planning meetings continued to be held and led to the eventual establishment of a clinic in the ACT that functioned independently (if infrequently) as a member of the Family Planning Association of Australia. The Senate Divorce Inquiry meetings led to the preparation by interested Canberra women of a submission for a Senate subcommittee on divorce and family matters entitled ‘Women and Divorce’. A group of women teachers began meeting at the Centre following the publication of the new Commonwealth Teaching Service Act with the intention of drawing up a petition to the Secondary Teachers Association to discuss provisions of the Act, which would disadvantage women. And the Mount Beauty planning and organisation meetings took place, eventually culminating in the Hevvies’ (National Theory) Conference the following January. This proved to be a pivotal conference with regards launching lesbianism firmly onto the national feminist agenda and is the subject of more detailed discussion later in the chapter.

After earlier unsuccessful attempts 1972 also marked the beginning of a successful period for the ANU women’s liberation group (known as the campus WL group). The campus group met every Monday night to ‘rap’ together, to discuss and plan actions, and attracted mostly undergraduate students. Eventually affiliated under section 9 of the ANU Clubs and Societies Regulations of the Student Representative Council, the stated object of the group was ‘to work for people’s liberation through the promotion of understanding of, and change in, distribution of roles according to sex’.48

Group initiator, Eileen Haley, believes that the campus group really came together after one of the Monday night meetings when they all decided to go to the pub. There, quite unintentionally, they attracted the unwanted attention of the regular drinkers because they were there without men and they were enjoying themselves. The abuse hurled at

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47 ‘Submission to Mr Gordon Bryant M.P., Minister for the Capital Territory, for the Purpose of Continuing a Women’s Centre in Canberra’, April, 1975, p. 5.

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them really allowed the women to feel ‘solidarity in the face of hostility’, says Haley.49 According to Haley, it was as a result of finding this group consciousness that they were inspired to embark upon public actions.50 In first term, prompted by a book of poetry called ‘i’ which had been put out by seven male members of the ANU Poetry Society, the campus WL group organised a Poetry Reading called ‘i, we, altogether and you’. In the reading, the group read out poems and excerpts from Sisterhood is Powerful,51 as well as their own poetry.

The new campus group was not, however, free of the problems that had hampered earlier attempts to set up a campus WL group. The most pressing issue, says Eileen Haley, was that she continually found herself stuck in a ‘leader’ position: ‘How does a woman who has been in another group, and got to know all the other literature and stuff ... relate to a new group which she has helped to initiate?’ she asked.52 Haley raised this issue with the Bremer Street women as well as with the campus group, hoping that by identifying and speaking about the problem a solution would be found. The group survived until the mid-1970s when all attempts to establish a specific women’s liberation group on campus ceased as women became involved in a variety of other feminist-inspired activities, including campaigning to get Women’s Studies onto the ANU curriculum, and trying to get feminist concerns onto the agenda of the Left groups on campus.

It would seem for all its productivity that the end of 1972 also witnessed the beginning of what was to be the first in a series of problematic periods for the Canberra movement. In the words of one member, writing retrospectively in 1976 about the 1972-73 period:

After three years of active, enthusiastic, and sometimes very rewarding involvement in the Women’s movement in Canberra, I dropped out, exhausted, frustrated, resentful, and disappointed. The exhaustion is gone now, but the thought of going back to meetings, participating in any activities, discoursing on sexism, revives in me stale smoulderings of resentment and guilt.53

The reasons as to why the movement may have hit troubled waters so soon after finally establishing the first women’s centre in Canberra and achieving so much in so many

51 Morgan (ed.), Sisterhood is Powerful.
areas, remain a matter of speculation. Perhaps the initial enthusiasm for a quick and simple revolution had been replaced with the reality of what was destined to be a long and complex struggle? Certainly in Canberra the amount of work done in the action groups in these early years was staggering but perhaps as more issues came up and were addressed, so too did it become apparent that there were no quick fixes.

The arrival of Pat Eatock at the Bremer Street house in April that year had perhaps shaken the confidence of this group of predominantly heterosexual middle-class white women who, in addition to having to deal with accusations of heterosexism (as discussed later in this chapter), found themselves directly confronted with the (largely unspoken) issues of racism and classism. The difference between supporting ‘the Aboriginal cause’ by inviting Bobbi Sykes and Pat Eatock to talk to Canberra women about Aboriginal issues, and having a homeless and penniless Aboriginal woman and her child camp out in the meeting room of Bremer Street must have been challenging to all those involved.

![Figure 24](image)

It is a telling omission that there is no mention of the fact that Pat Eatock was living in the Centre in any of the newsletters, and there is certainly no indication that this was a problematic arrangement as Eatock’s later description of that time suggests:

> 1972 had been an extremely tough year. Separated from my children, I was often in despair. When meetings closed, usually in the early hours of the morning, I was left alone to cry myself to sleep: no future, no place to go. Too ‘working-class’ proud to ask for charity, I fed the baby sugar-water while humorously describing my latest battle with welfare. During the first nine weeks I received only two $10
food vouchers. Few women at the meeting noticed. I understand, but still resent, the pressures put on me to ‘move on’. Three or four weeks is insufficient time for a woman in crisis to get back on her feet.54

Almost thirty years later, it remains a matter of speculation as to how much impact Pat Eatock’s presence in the house had on the Canberra movement, in much the same way as we can only guess how much impact the lesbian issue had. Regardless of the origins however, it is impossible to deny that by September 1972 something was seriously amiss in the Canberra group. The newsletter that month contains the following plea:

**Wednesday, 13th September WHAT’S HAPPENING TO THE CANBERRA WOMEN’S LIBERATION MOVEMENT?**

This is a most important meeting - please come! Our paid up mailing list numbers 160. Yet numbers at meetings seem to be getting fewer. Monday night Action Workshops and Thursday night Rap Sessions have ceased to exist. Wednesday meetings are never more than 25. General meetings are usually 6 or 7, thereby leaving decision-making and a lot of work to very few! Are we a growing movement? Or are we stagnating? How can we make Wednesday nights work better as a meeting place for women? What do people feel about them as they are now? Should we have a public meeting? Or something else? When? Where? How? Who?55

The enormous amount of work being done in various action groups combined with the unexpected difficulties that surfaced through attending and organising conferences, and the never-ending quest to find money to keep the women’s centre functional, were all undoubtedly contributing to a growing sense of unease in the Canberra movement. Add to these more concrete problems, rapid change and unspoken undercurrents and tensions and the situation in the latter part of 1972 becomes more understandable. The problems facing the Canberra movement simply refused to disappear leading to a complete crisis situation some six months later as can be seen in the ‘Obituary’ foreshadowing the death of WL House which appears in the May 1973 newsletter:

As each month passes she becomes weaker and weaker - the life blood of rent money appears to be drying up. New donors are urgently needed, for transfusions of money are the only way to keep her healthy. Her existence has made the activities of the Women’s movement in Canberra easier, happier and more widespread. She has indeed been a focal point for women politically and socially, if she does die, it will be the most serious blow the Women’s movement has yet had to endure here. It is up to those who frequent her, who value her existence, to help her to continue. At the moment she’s fading away. Help the lady live – pledge money for rent now – and make sure you remember to send it in.56

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The July-August 1973 newsletter contains a letter from an anonymous member of the Canberra women’s liberation group which poses several possible reasons for the decline in numbers. She suggests that three years is a long time for any group to have lasted and that the decline of enthusiasm and confidence is inevitable in such a turbulent political environment. The author also maintains that the changes brought about by women’s liberation have made it possible for women to work for change outside the movement and that overall (and unintentionally) the ‘emergence of WEL has had an undermining effect on WL’.57

The 1972-73 period was, as earlier noted, a busy and increasingly complex one for the Canberra women. The start of WEL-ACT in May 1972 saw a number of women from the women’s liberation group change allegiances and although some remained active in both groups this must have had an impact on the original women’s liberation group. It should however be noted that in their early years, despite the occasional hiccup, both WEL and Canberra WL co-existed relatively peacefully under the one roof, often jointly organising events and activities as well as meeting and functioning separately. One of the more notable feats of 1972-73 period was the organisation by a core group of WL women of the successful but controversial Hevvies’ Conference (27-29 January 1973).

The Hevvies’ conference, Mount Beauty, 1973

The conference was the beginning of my activism and the beginning of my awareness of myself as being a lesbian. Thus 1973 became the first year I began to look at lesbianism as an issue.58

This gathering, known variously as the Hevvies’ conference, or the Mt. Beauty (Theory) conference,59 marks a pivotal moment in any history of the women’s movement in Australia and yet, despite their later feminist involvement, none of the narrators mentioned ever being aware of it. Conference participant Elizabeth Reid retrospectively described the conference as follows:

The national conference at Mount Beauty in January 1973 was an important milestone in the growing-up of the movement. There we had attempted to clarify

57 Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, July-August, 1973, p. 3.
59 The original name of the conference ‘Aspects of the Theory of Feminism’ never really stuck.
the meaning for us of notions of sisterhood, of claims that the personal is political and of debates between reform and revolution.\textsuperscript{60}

Organised by the Canberra women's liberation group, and held at Mt Beauty, Victoria, 27-29 January, this conference tends to be remembered as the one where the lesbian issue launched itself firmly onto the national feminist agenda in Australia with the presentation of a paper by Hobart Women's Action Group (HWAG) titled 'Sexism and Women's Liberation or ... Why do straight sisters sometimes cry when they are called lesbians?'\textsuperscript{61}

The impetus for the Mt Beauty conference came in the wake of the second national women's liberation conference held the previous year in Sydney and at which the issue of lesbians in the movement had been raised amongst others for the first time at a national level. Considered overall to be a success, many women felt the Sydney conference suffered from trying to do too much in too short a space of time. It was however, as the early conferences tended to be, a site of both learning and inspiration for those who attended and participated in them. Some members of the Canberra women's liberation group who had been frustrated by the superficiality of many of the discussions in Sydney, decided to try to organise a conference around one specific area of feminism in the hope that this would create an environment in which a deeper level of discussion would be possible. The rationale for their decision is explained in an early letter to potential conference participants:

> The Sydney Conference, we felt, had been too general - it tried to tackle everything. So we decided that we would prefer to concentrate on one particular area of feminism. The area we chose was theory. We weren't without our qualms at opting for words not deeds, when there is obviously a need for solid discussion of strategy and planning of action. But we felt that discussion of theory, also, was important; and the letters we have received have confirmed our feeling that many women in the movement also thought such a conference worthwhile and needed.\textsuperscript{62}

After due discussion and as a result of feedback from potential participants, it was decided to organise the conference discussions by theme.\textsuperscript{63} The original themes were:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Hobart Women's Action Group (HWAG), 'Sexism and Women's Liberation or ... Why do straight sisters sometimes cry when they are called lesbians?', Mt Beauty Hevvies Conference paper, 1973. Also reprinted in the Lesbian issue of \textit{Refractory Girl}, No. 5, Summer, 1974, pp. 30-33.
\item \textsuperscript{62} 'January Theory Conference', Canberra Women's Liberation form letter, 15 August, 1972.
\item \textsuperscript{63} A handout was initially sent out to interested parties to get feedback on whether women would prefer discussion by theme or theorists. The suggested theorists were: Engels, Reich, de Beauvoir, Marcuse, Figes, Firestone, Evelyn Reed, Juliet Mitchell, Laing & Cooper, Freud. 'Tentative Plans for Theory Conference Handout', Canberra Women's Liberation, 1972.
\end{itemize}
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1. The Historical Origin of Female Oppression (Biology? Private property? Is the Matriarchy a Myth?)
2. Sisterhood (Are women a caste? A class? Can they unite?)
3. The Patriarchy
   (a) The Nature of Authority (Where is power located? What forms does it take? Is power necessary?)
   (b) The Family (Is it the model of all power-hierarchies? etc)
4. Feminism (Liberal, radical, socialist feminism – how do they differ?)
5. Australian Sexism (Do you wake in fright?)

By August 1972 the conference organisers had four offers of papers including one on ‘Radical Lesbianism’ – a later circular confirms this paper as being the controversial and contentious contribution by the Hobart women’s liberation group. By November 1972 one paper had been received and the total promised had risen to ten.

A press release by Elizabeth Macdougall (for the Conference Project Group) just prior to the conference announced that over 100 women from Canberra, Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart, would be attending the ‘Aspects of the Theory of Feminism’ conference at Mt Beauty. The conference, it was hoped, would contribute to the feminist analysis of sexism in modern Australia, and help us work out how the women’s movement as a whole might go about transforming this society so that women, children and men no longer suffer from restrictive sex roles.

The initial five themes of the conference had by this stage been consolidated into the following three: ‘A Worldwide Perspective’, ‘Being a Woman in Australia’ and ‘Towards Liberation’.

The final timetable for the conference scheduled the presentation of seven papers on the Saturday afternoon (following the introductory session in the morning); two further papers on Saturday evening; and five on Sunday afternoon. Sunday and

67 The paper received was from the Hurstville WL Group on ‘The Historical Origin of Female Oppression’. The other papers offered were: Barbara Wishart ‘Problems of Political Participation of Women in Australia’; Barbara Aylsen ‘The History and Culture of Women’; Hobart WL ‘Radical Lesbianism’; Martha Kay ‘How, where and with whom does a radical feminist work?’; Greensborough (VIC) WL ‘Australian Sexism’; Canberra WL ‘Juliet Mitchell’ and ‘Women and work’; Louise King ‘How Women’s Liberation Can Be Revolutionary despite its Middle Class Base’; Maggie Wilson ‘The Organisation of Women’s Liberation’; Bronwyn Dyson ‘Women’s Liberation and Western Society’.
Monday mornings were dedicated to workshop discussion groups. The Hobart WL paper was scheduled last paper in the final session, 'Towards Liberation' on Sunday afternoon.

**Rocking the heterosexual boat: the controversial lesbian paper**

_This was a conference full of controversy, but the most contentious paper came from the Hobart women's liberation movement. It was entitled 'Sexism and women's liberation or ... why do straight sisters sometimes cry when they are called lesbians'?_69

_Well I first heard about women's liberation, I wouldn't have anything to do with it. Aloud I said I was liberated and didn't need that stuff, but inside I was afraid people would think I was a lesbian if I associated with all those women._70

The Hobart WL paper ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ... “Why do straight sisters sometimes cry when they are called lesbians?”’ was not well received at the Mt Beauty conference.71 The paper addressed what we would today call ‘heterosexism’, and what was then called ‘sexism’. It argued that women's liberation had not dealt with the discrimination and oppression faced by lesbians in and outside the movement. Women's liberationists, it argued, had ignored the lesbian issue altogether; lesbians were considered useful to the movement but only in so far as they identified as women and not lesbians; in short lesbians were ‘acceptable as long as they subordinate[d] their demands or individuality to the “broader” aims of the movement’.72

In the context of an international Women’s Liberation Movement, the lesbian issue took a little longer to surface in Australia than in America. Given the differences between the two countries this is not surprising. Unlike the situation in America, for

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72 HWAG, ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ...’, p. 1. It is interesting to note that the experience of lesbians in the women’s movement in the west in the early 1970s is mirrored in the experiences of lesbians involved in feminist organising in the 1990s outside of the west where it is assumed that any open declaration of lesbianism will endanger the movement. Gita Thadani discusses the problem in India where organised feminism provides one of the few public homosocial spaces where women can interact with one another but only at the expense of perpetuating a ‘closet lesbian culture on the grounds that any open declaration of lesbianism will endanger the movement’. ‘It is assumed’, writes Thadani, ‘that any open lesbian identity is the prerogative of the “first world” but is not suitable for a “developing country”, where other issues are more important.’ Assumptions such as this tend to have far reaching consequences. In India, according to Thadani, it has ‘meant that there have been major public campaigns around reproductive sexuality, but not on lesbianism or the right to sexual choice.’ Gita Thadani, _Sakhiyani. Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India_, Cassell, London, 1996, pp. 89-90.
example, pre-feminist lesbian organising was only in its infancy in Australia in the late 1960s and had all but ceased happening by the mid 1970s. By this I do not mean to imply that lesbian organising did not exist at all in Australia in the early 1970s, rather that the Australasian Lesbian Movement (1969-72) and Claudia’s Group (1973-74) were two of the only organisations run by lesbians for lesbians during this period which weren’t somehow connected to women’s or gay liberation. I am not suggesting that there were no pre-feminist lesbian sub-cultures in Australia – there were of course numerous private social gatherings, and the armed forces also provided the ingredients for a hidden lesbian sub-culture to flourish. But there were no lesbian organisations that advertised themselves in the same way that Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) did in America throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Similar sentiments to those expressed in the Hobart WL paper in 1973 in Australia had in fact been aired as early as 1968 by the Women’s Liberation Movement in America. Martha Shelly writing about the protests by women’s liberationists at the 1968 Miss America pageant, says:

When members of the Women’s Liberation Movement picketed the ... pageant, the most terrible epithet heaped on our straight sisters was ‘Lesbian’. The sisters faced hostile audiences who called them ‘commies’ and ‘tramps’, but some of them broke into tears when they were called Lesbians.73

And in May 1970 at the Second Congress to Unite Women about thirty women from the New York Gay Liberation Front (GLF) took over the convention after appearing on stage (after an orchestrated power blackout) in Lavender Menace t-shirts. They spoke passionately about their experiences of being lesbians in a heterosexual society hoping to gain acceptance and support from their straight feminist sisters.74 It seems likely that this event and Shelly’s article influenced the Hobart WL paper givers, if only in terms of the title, especially given that there is no mention in the paper of any incidents, Australian or otherwise, where straight sisters actually did cry when they were called ‘lesbian’. Given the enthusiasm with which all of the revolutionary literature from America was being devoured by Australian women’s liberationists, it is likely that the Hobart movement was familiar with it. This supposition is supported by the fact that by this point Canberra women’s liberation members had themselves read and discussed Robin Morgan’s 1970 *Sisterhood is Powerful* anthology in which the Shelly article is reprinted.

74 For a detailed account of the Lavender Menace action see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be BAD: Radical Feminism in America 1967-75*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 214-16.
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Whether lesbianism was inevitably going to be an issue in the women’s movement in Australia can only, from a contemporary perspective, be a matter of speculation. Was the Australian movement destined to be a replica of the American movement taking on board the same issues albeit a few years later? Or did the Australian movement evolve on its own with limited input from the other side of the world? I would suggest that the women’s movement evolved differently in every part of Australia, and whilst each one was influenced by the women’s movement in America, each took only what was needed from its American predecessor based on that which resonated with its own internal dynamics.

The Hobart WL paper, for example, draws on specific personal examples of lesbian discrimination to illustrate the heterosexist underpinnings of the women’s movement as experienced in Hobart. The catalogue of personal experiences of discrimination are listed as follows:

1. being called a bull dyke for speaking out at a Gay Lib./Women’s Lib. session on sexism.
2. having one’s consciousness ‘raised’ by a discussion on how to cope with being called ‘that horrible name’ at our first womens lib meeting
3. being told to keep out of the movement because ‘some women won’t come if lesbians are there, and those women shouldn’t be put off because WL is for all women’
4. having to change the pronouns at consciousness raising meetings (or just shut up) for the above reason.
5. being told you’re simply a media problem (remember?).
6. standing on the edge of the dance floor at a WL party knowing that sisterhood is only for straight sisters.
7. throwing yourself into the child care centre/pram bus struggle to prove you haven’t got any interests of your own.
8. being told to ’come out’ and risk your job (if you’re honest) and then working flat out to help other women to get jobs of their own.
9. being told lesbianism is a ‘passing phase’ in women’s lib.
10. finding out that the lady you’re in bed with is a ‘real woman’ (liberated variety) and you’re only a hardened lesbian (sick variety).

The paper argues that lesbian discrimination is embedded in some of the very structures and concepts utilised by women’s liberation including ‘consciousness raising’ and ‘sisterhood’. Many of the assumptions behind CR, it is argued, make it

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impossible for lesbians to speak freely about themselves. This is especially highlighted when it comes to discussions about personal relationships when it is frequently assumed that the other person in the relationship is not present in the group. For a lesbian to speak freely in such an environment tends to assume ‘a degree of vulnerability before other women not expected of them’.76

The notion of sisterhood is a confusing and almost contradictory one, according to the Hobart WL group. In theory, where ‘sisterhood is based on the idea that women have for so long competed for men against each other that they now have to learn to appreciate each other as people’, it would seem as though lesbians ‘should fit perfectly into the sisterhood ethic’.77 In practice, say the Hobart WL group, this is not so. Whilst there is a tendency to use a pseudo-lesbian model of sisterhood that emphasises women loving and appreciating each other within the movement this is rarely sexualised. And in the instances where it is, by American theorists like Ann Koedt and Shulamith Firestone, a questionable leap from homosexuality to bisexuality tends to occur. ‘As a matter of fact’ writes Koedt, ‘if “Freedom of sexual preference” is the demand, the solution obviously must be a bisexuality where the question becomes irrelevant’.78 This leap, the Hobart women rationalise, allows for a solution that extends the already privileged heterosexual experience but denies the validity of homosexual and/or lesbian experiences.

The paper further discusses the work of Ann Oakley, Simone de Beauvoir and Norman Mailer to illustrate the problems inherent in contemporary women’s liberation ideology when the old values of femininity are merely invested with a new status. If such a scenario succeeds, they argue, the status quo may be altered but the lesbian remains a misfit.79 If ‘WL acquiesces in the creation of new stereotypes of masculinity/femininity, it will simply have failed in what should be its major aim’ warns the Hobart WL group in their concluding paragraph, ‘that of turning sexist controlled robots into people’.80

Gisela Kaplan argues that in spite of the timely introduction of the issue of lesbian oppression and discrimination at the Mt Beauty conference ‘the movement missed a valuable opportunity to debate its own sexist beliefs and practices, endorsing ... “sexual

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76 HWAG, ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ...’, p. 2.
77 HWAG, ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ...’, p. 2.
78 HWAG, ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ...’, p. 2.
79 HWAG, ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ...’, p. 5.
80 HWAG, ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ...’, p. 6.
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silences in feminism". On a local scale, the experiences of the Canberra movement (as outlined in the following section) support Kaplan’s notion. On a national scale, however, there is enough evidence to cast doubt on Kaplan’s claim that the women’s movement had missed its chance to address its (hetero)sexism. Throughout 1974 a heated debate continued between HWAG and other lesbian feminists, aspects of which saw publication in the lesbian issue of *Refractory Girl*, as well as the issue immediately following which was produced in Hobart by the ‘Liberaction diaspora’ and in which they provide a critical account of the lesbian debate in Australia as it then existed titled ‘Lesbians and their Girlfriends’. On the reaction and impact of the HWAG paper Sue Wills later commented:

> Arguments over how to interpret the reception of the paper ... will doubtless continue to engage us as we hobble around the Old Feminist Home with the aid of walking sticks. What is important is what the presentation of the paper signified; a group of lesbians symbolically external ... to Women’s Liberation went into the heart of the Movement and accused it of being hostile to lesbians and lesbianism.

**Lesbianism in the movement: from murmurs to loud whispers**

> here we two female human beings are
> sitting on the couch and i am close to you my
> friend the daylight world we’ve learned has got
> our relationship in its grip and i can’t move
> my arm to where it wants to be
> around you
> it stays here alongside my body where it has been
> taught to belong when i try to let it go to you
> it will only approach and pat your hand three times
> and return to my side god help me i want you so.

The first mention of lesbianism within women’s liberation in Canberra comes earlier than one might expect given that it was 1972-73 that the ‘lesbian issue’ really took

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82 The ‘Liberaction diaspora’ consisted of Anne Picot, Lorraine Miller, Frances Bonner, Kay Daniels, Rosemary Pringle, Marilyn Lake and Shirley Castley.


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centre stage in the movement at a national level.86 According to a 1971 newsletter, two
lesbians from Sydney’s recently formed Campaign Against Moral Persecution Inc.
(CAMP) group were scheduled to talk to the Northside women’s liberation group on
Wednesday, 5 May.87 There is no information as to what the talk was to be about and as
I have been unable to locate the June and July newsletters I am unable to ascertain
whether it even happened. Several months later a Canberra branch of CAMP is
advertised in a few newsletters but no further information about the group is provided
and it would appear that soon thereafter CAMP ACT ceased to exist altogether.88

Although the CAMP Inc. talk in 1971 is the first overt mention of lesbianism in the
Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, elsewhere, Marion Paull, a lesbian who moved
to Canberra in 1970, has written about her less than positive experience of being
dragged into the women’s movement by her lover around this time:

We were asked to go to our local WLM meeting to talk about living as lesbians in a
straight society, and of course, they all looked at this six-footer with short dark hair
and trousers, accompanied by her lover, who was five feet four with shoulder­
length light brown hair, and they accused us of role playing, imitating heterosexual
couples. They expressed their disappointment in a very aggressive way, I recall.
They never stopped to look at what we were doing. We hung in there for about a
year before we went overseas.89

On a national level, as previously mentioned, the issue of lesbians and their place in the
women’s movement was first aired as one of many issues at the second national
women’s liberation conference held in Sydney in June 1972.90 Attended by about two
hundred women, the majority of conference participants came from Sydney and
nearby Canberra, although smaller numbers from the rest of Australia also attended.
On the second night of the conference a forum on ‘Sexual Liberation’ was held where
three papers were presented by members of Sydney’s Gay Liberation Movement.
While the presenters spoke about ‘the oppression of the homosexual; bisexuality and

86 I do not mean to imply that the lesbian issue was not discussed in feminist settings prior to 1973 but
rather to indicate that it was not until the Mt Beauty conference that it was taken up at a national level as
opposed to at a local level.
88 The October 1971 newsletter announces that ‘Camp Ink’s Canberra Group is now a going thing’ and
advertises (belatedly) a meeting of the group on September 30 at Flat 6/70 Northbourne Avenue to talk
about the future and to ‘put a lot of time into the Draft Criminal Code’. Canberra Women’s Liberation
Newsletter, October, 1971, p. 3.
89 Marion Paull, ‘A Letter from Australia’ in Joan Nestle (ed.), The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader,
90 The conference held from 10-13 June, 1972.
women in GL; and the psycho-sexual revolution', when it came time to break into small groups the discussion turned to lesbians in the Women's Liberation Movement. It was decided that the movement as a whole could benefit from open and honest discussion about lesbianism. Questions deemed worthy of consideration included: 'Is there hostility towards lesbians within the movement? Is this a real hostility or does it arise due to the ignorance and apprehension of both straight and gay women? Are we being heterosexual chauvinists?'

The call to examine the accusation of heterosexism within the movement was taken seriously by many at the conference but it was another six months before it truly exploded as a national movement issue. At the time, however, the lesbian issue was taken quite seriously by some members of the Canberra women's liberation group who took it upon themselves to organise a discussion night on 'Heterosexual Chauvinism' not long after the conference. This discussion, introduced by Biff MacDougall, was unsuccessful, and prompted a further meeting on 'Lesbianism and Feminism' in September 1972. This gathering was organised to discuss the New York Radicalesbian 'Women-Identified Woman' paper and began with WL members, Claire and Louise, speaking out on heterosexual chauvinism in the movement. The ideas gleaned from this meeting resulted in a further discussion night, 'Perspectives on Lesbianism' in early October. In late 1972 the ANU campus WL group also joined forces with the small gay liberation group on campus to put together a People's Fete for Bush Week.

It was, however, only after the presentation at the January Hevvies' conference of the HWAG paper 'Why do straight sisters sometimes cry when they are called lesbians?', that lesbian issues and concerns came to be taken up with any sort of on-going commitment by women's liberation groups throughout the country. In Melbourne, more so than in any of the other capitals, the issue was taken especially seriously. In Canberra, for example, there is no evidence of the sort of political mobilisation that motivated the Melbourne Gay Women's Group to organise what was to become the

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93 That the discussion was 'unsuccessful' is reported in the newsletter but there is no elaboration as to why, or it what ways, it was unsuccessful – leaving open speculations that the discussion was sparsely attended or else it was poorly received by those that did. Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, July, 1972, p. 1.
95 Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, July, 1972, p. 3.
first national lesbian conference in Australia later that year (as discussed in Chapter Two).

In the months following the Hevvies conference the lesbian issue remained unmentioned in the *Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter* until the June/July 1973 issue which includes advertisements for the National Radical Lesbians Conference in Melbourne (June 22-24) and a Gay Camp in Adelaide (May 11-19), as well as a lesbian poem titled ‘Contact’ which appears at the beginning of this section. Between July 1973 and May 1974 there is no mention of anything relating to lesbians in the Canberra newsletter. But with the May issue the tone of the publication changes radically indicating perhaps that a different editorial group has taken over. The newsletter contains a new section titled ‘BITCHING’ which includes a ‘Droopy Penis Award of the Month’ and a media watch section which includes snippets from mainstream newspapers and magazines (which occasionally include some lesbian content). Starting with this issue a selection of lesbian-oriented editorial comments also begin to appear throughout the newsletter. They include comments like: ‘Gay Liberation is Going to Get You’; ‘I tell you IT’S MORE FUN WITH A WOMAN’; and a selection of (mostly) unreferenced quotes, like ‘Less is known about her [the Lesbian] – and less accurately – than the Newfoundland dog’.

Lesbian content continues to feature in the *Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter* over the next few months. The May edition of *Pol* is reported to contain an article titled ‘A Fascinating Look at a Vexing Social Question’ on lesbian mothers and the accompanying editorial maintains that in spite of the somewhat ambiguous title it is actually quite good. The Dr Duncan Revolution Bookshop includes in its listing,
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Amazon Expedition: a lesbian feminist anthology, an American collection of influential lesbian feminist articles by Ti-Grace Atkinson, Joanna Russ, Esther Newton, Jill Johnston and Bertha Harris. Refractory Girl No. 5 is advertised openly as a lesbian issue.

Figure 25 Dr Duncan Demonstration, 1972.

A long review of Robert R. Bell’s book The Sex Survey of Australian Women appeared in the August 1974 issue of the Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, the same year that the book was published. Professor Bell, an American sociologist was a visiting fellow at La Trobe University in 1972-73 where he researched and wrote the book, the first of its kind in Australia. Given that there had, to this time, been little study of sexual behaviour in Australia, certainly nothing approaching the Kinsey research in America, Bell’s aim was to provide some empirical evidence about female sexuality in Australia.

In 1973 Bell conducted a survey of 1,442 randomly selected women with the aim of investigating the sexual habits and behaviour of Australian married women. He does acknowledge that for all his random selection criteria, his study tends to draw on women who are more highly educated and less religious than might be typical of the Australian female population; it is also skewed towards working women and, Bell speculates, the more sexually experienced. Whilst stating that few immigrant women of Italian and Greek background are included in the study, Bell does not specify the background of those who are – one is left to assume them to be predominantly of Anglo heritage. The survey respondents are primarily from Victoria (59%) with a further twenty-five per cent from New South Wales and the ACT, and the remaining sixteen percent from other parts of Australia.


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Bell's research is interesting in that it is the first of its kind in Australia. I include it here, however, more because it appears in a two page review in the Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, than for its sociological findings. The review provides an interesting example of a particular sort of feminist criticism that can easily be interpreted as 'anti-male', 'man-hating' or 'separatist'. One gets the impression that regardless of what Bell's findings were, they would have been criticised simply because he was a man researching women's sexuality. Regardless of whether this is a reasonable or appropriate stance, it is noteworthy in this instance because this is the first example of it to appear so blatantly in the Canberra newsletter. Prior to this, there has been the occasional discussion about men's role in the movement and indeed, in its early days, many of the members' husbands had been actively supportive of the cause. But in this review, Bell, a self-proclaimed feminist, is taken to task for all manner of things. The anonymous reviewer sets the tone in her opening paragraph:

As the book claims to be the first survey ever carried out to investigate the sexual behaviour of Australian women, it is probably worth reading. However this fact may prove to be one of the few benefits to emerge from the whole exercise.¹⁰⁴

Bell's methodology is deemed flawed, his conclusions non-feminist, he is castigated for not making his wife a co-author (rather than merely acknowledging her valuable input), and he is belittled for not taking into account such things as 'internalising external factors'.¹⁰⁵ Whether this review is symptomatic of one woman's state of mind or of a wider political atmosphere in the Canberra movement can only be a matter of speculation. Many of the criticisms levelled at Bell are unjust and are the result of taking his work out of context. Bell actually appears to be highly sensitive to, and critical of, the pressure male domination places on women both within, and outside of, the sexual arena; his research reveals a growing sense of frustration and anger in Australian women as they try to shake off the shackles of male domination. Additionally, given the dearth of information pertaining to lesbianism in Australian society, that Bell actually includes a section on 'homosexuality' should not be taken lightly, as this no doubt served to assure some women that their feelings were not as abnormal as they might have thought. Bell's survey found that 3% of respondents had been sexual with another woman and 22% said that they would enjoy it 'very much' or 'sometimes'.

¹⁰⁴ Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, August, 1974, p. 4.
¹⁰⁵ Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, August, 1974, pp. 4-5.
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The October 1974 newsletter contains a report by roving Canberra women’s liberationist, Jenny Oswald, on the National Women’s Conference in Edinburgh. Attended by some 900 women the conference covered a wide range of issues from welfare and the State, to medicine and self-determination. Two major demands were proposed and accepted by participants before the close of the conference. The first concerned legal and financial independence for women, and the second, lesbian discrimination and female sexuality. This second demand was a result of a resolution brought forward from a Lesbian Conference held in Canterbury earlier in the year. The Saturday afternoon of the Edinburgh conference was dedicated to workshops on lesbianism. Oswald reports that the workshops went well and that most women came away from discussions feeling good about the direction things were going. She herself came away with a better understanding of lesbian issues and a strong commitment to fighting lesbian discrimination:

> I feel that it is very important that we make a commitment to fight discrimination against lesbians and to be able to define our own sexuality for ourselves and not to have [it] imposed on us. It’s taken me a long time to realise that my personal tolerance is not enough. I think maybe as a straight sister I have been insensitive to the fears that lesbian sisters must have that straight women would not fight against their oppression, as lesbian women fight against the oppression of their straight sisters.\(^{106}\)

Jenny Oswald’s testimony here is noteworthy for a few reasons. Firstly, it illustrates one of the ways in which international feminist networking was happening in the women’s movement, by means of Australian women overseas sending information back home.\(^{107}\) And secondly, Oswald’s involvement in the Canberra women’s movement from 1971, and her seemingly new found philosophy on lesbianism as evidenced here, suggests that lesbian discrimination was an unspoken, unresolved and/or continuing issue in the Canberra group as late as 1974. That Oswald’s report appears in the same issue as an excerpt from Jill Johnston’s highly influential *Lesbian Nation* seems quite fitting.\(^{108}\)

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\(^{106}\) *Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter*, October, 1974, p. 3.

\(^{107}\) The October 1974 edition of Australian *Cleo* magazine contains a report on the women’s movement in America – the mainstream media was another sporadic (and not always sympathetic) means by which information about the women’s movement in other parts of the world got to Australia.

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The end of 1974, following a turbulent but fruitful three year run, also marks the end of Bremer Street as Canberra’s women’s centre. Apart from the usual pleas for pledges and subscription payments, there is little in the immediately preceding newsletters to indicate that the end is in sight. Unlike previous moments in the centre’s history when potential demise has threatened there are no last minute pleas or eulogies. Apart from the August Financial Report which records a balance of $194.63, outstanding debts of $232, and notes that ‘the situation is not good but would be improved if those people who owed money for literature or for STD calls would pay’, there are no signs that the centre is in any trouble. In the end, Bremer Street it would seem, simply bowed out quietly and gracefully. Had the movement in Canberra followed suit, it is unlikely that the lesbian (feminist) community would have emerged when and how it did in the late 1970s. Indeed had the Women’s Liberation Movement never again resurfaced, it is likely that there never would have been such a community in Canberra. One can only speculate what this would have meant for those women whose lives, like those of the narrators, were radically influenced by the existence of that community. On a national level, however, women’s liberation had taken root and women’s liberation in Canberra did continue, albeit for a time without a women’s centre or a newsletter.

Chapter Four

Women’s liberation in Canberra – the later years

This chapter traces stage two of women’s liberation in Canberra documenting the hunt for a new women’s centre and the decision to produce a new newsletter. The mid and late 1970s were a time of struggle in Canberra and the early optimism and passion of the movement never returned. Some of the early women’s liberationists remained involved in the movement but many others channelled their feminist energies elsewhere and new women filled their places. In one sense, one could argue that the second half of the 1970s witnessed the emergence of a new, different but still related women’s movement, and it was out of this movement that Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community evolved.

During this period, seven of the eight narrators were living in Canberra but of them, only two were involved with feminism in any way. Teresa, in her late teens, was aware of feminism because of her mother and sister’s involvement in the Canberra women’s movement. She was also one of the first class of secondary students to do Women’s Studies at Hawker College. Kate, on the other hand, had moved to Canberra to attend the Australian National University (ANU) in 1973 where she became involved with the campus-based radical feminists. She had little to do with the community-based women’s liberationists although she was aware of their existence. In 1974, Kate took part in the student takeover of the Vice Chancellor’s office demanding that Women’s Studies be included in the ANU curriculum.

Of the remaining six narrators, two were still married. Leigh was married with three children, living in the suburbs and wondering if that was all there was to life. Dee was living in Melbourne with her husband and two sons. She was attending university as a mature age student and had begun playing soccer and socialising with a group of women, one of whom scared her half to death by accepting her half-baked invitation that they ‘sleep together’. Feminism had yet to impact on Leigh and Dee’s lives although in retrospect, both acknowledge the writing was on the wall.
The other four narrators were all at various stages of exploring their lesbianism. Erin and Jocelyn were in their last years of school. Erin had had crushes on her female teachers, which she was keeping very much to herself as she experimented heterosexually with her best friend’s boyfriend and wondered what the fuss was about. Jocelyn, on the other hand, had acted on her female crushes, albeit secretly, whilst she was still at school. When the end of the school year came and her first female lover dumped her, Jocelyn was distraught. Her distress was further compounded because of the closeted nature of the relationship which meant she was unable to talk about it with anyone. Around this time, Jocelyn tried heterosex but quickly decided it was not for her. Despite the existence of gay liberation groups in other Australian cities and despite the gradual emergence of a lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra during this period, it was only when Jocelyn went travelling overseas that she was finally able to come out as a lesbian. Over ten years older than Erin and Jocelyn, by the mid 1970s, Pat and Emma had both accepted that they were lesbians; both had experienced sex with women and the sense of belonging that came from being around other lesbians. Each one mixed in different circles, however, and did not encounter feminism until later in the decade.

Throughout this chapter, where relevant, I have noted the narrators’ interactions with the women’s movement or offered reminders of where they were up to in their journeys towards the evolving lesbian (feminist) community. Fuller narratives of the eight women’s parallel experiences of this period are included in Part III of the history.

From Bremer St to Lobelia St: a changing women’s movement

A poem written by women’s liberationist, Biff Ward, which appears in the September/October 1975 issue of the Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, conveys the complexity of one of the key issues facing the Canberra movement in the mid-1970s. How was it possible to combine the personal and the political without favouring one more than the other? In her words:

Feminism/ has made me so aware/ of so many things happening/ in me/ on me/ to me/ against me/ from me/ behind me/ beyond me/ and all around all of us/ that the decision of either/ speeding up to solve it all/ or slowing down to save myself/ has come/ between me

1 Biff Ward, Untitled poem, Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, September/October, 1975, p. 3.
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As Suzanne Dixon remembers the time, much had been achieved but perhaps only at the expense of 'sisterhood'. In her words:

What a shock. I came back to a completely different women's movement ... The Women's House had moved. Nobody seemed to spend any time raising consciousness or talking theory. Lots of things we had pushed for had gained central funding: there was a women's refuge and an abortion counselling centre, there was an employment re-training scheme. It was action, action. Great. But where was the sisterhood?2

The recognition by the United Nations of 1975 as International Women’s Year (IWY), combined with the unprecedented amount of funding poured into women’s liberation events and activities throughout the year, should have been cause for celebration and should have been proof that the women’s movement was truly making headway globally. In Canberra however, 1975 proved to be a 'one step forward, two steps back' kind of a year. Being host to the IWY Women and Politics Conference in March, proved to be a double-edged blade. Publicly, the conference was declared a success but in reality it brought many controversial issues to boiling point, not least of which was the 'lesbian issue'. Conspicuous by its apparent absence at the IWY Women and Politics Conference in Canberra 1975, the lesbian issue collided headlong with the 'mainstream' feminist agenda in the aftermath of the conference.

Figures 26 & 27 Charlotte Bunch speaking about women and power at the IWY Women and Politics conference, Canberra, 1975; Charlotte Bunch, Dawn Laurie, MLA (NT), Bertha Harris and Edith van Horn chat inbetween sessions at the IWY Women and Politics conference, Canberra, 1975.

In an ABC Lateline discussion, visiting American lesbian feminist, Charlotte Bunch explained the problem:

First of all you have to realise that there were many lesbians at the conference, both among the overseas delegates and among the women from Australia there, yet I think that in no public place in the conference or in the press covering the conference, was there any acknowledgment of either the presence of the lesbians, or the lesbian feminist politics discussions that did go on. There were several workshops that were not reported, not only in the media outside but even within the conference. And in the wrapping up sessions of the conference, as far as anyone would know, there had not been a lesbian there and there had been no discussion of the issue of lesbian feminism. I would call that basically, the question being kept in the closet. ³

This precise situation – where the lesbian presence in the movement was ignored or denied – had occurred in America, according to Charlotte Bunch, some five years earlier. ⁴ As the only narrator involved in feminist activities at this time, Kate recalls that lesbianism did exist as a largely unspoken element of community-based feminism in Canberra in the mid-1970s. She thinks that lesbianism was far more on the feminist agenda in cities like Sydney and Melbourne. At this time Kate was in a relationship with another woman in Canberra and says that it was ‘quite an isolating experience’⁵; in her experience, outside of the leftist radical feminist environment of the ANU, there was little support for lesbians even in the off-campus women’s liberation group.

Whether Charlotte Bunch’s analysis of the state of the women’s movement and the lesbian issue can be applied to all of Australia is questionable, but in the context of the conference and Canberra it does seem to provide an accurate depiction. During the mid-1970s, in the increasingly problematic feminist climate in Canberra, the acquisition of a new women’s house after an period of homelessness, added a much-needed, if controversial spark, to the downward spiralling women’s movement.

By early 1975, the hunt for a new women’s house was well under way. In the face of a limited rental market, there was a strong desire within the movement to actually buy a house, and three women, Carol Ambrus, Jo Aldridge and Kay Haszler (WEL representative), approached a real estate agent with the aim of locating a suitable property. Disillusioned to discover that most of the places available within their price range were extremely pokey, the women were impressed when they inspected 86

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⁵ Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
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Walker Crescent, Narrabundah which roughly fitted the criteria for a headquarters. Priced at $26,500, a deal was negotiated whereby the house would be rented at $25 a week for three months giving the women time in which to raise 25% of the cost – the bank agreed to lend the movement approximately $20,000 towards the total. A proposal was put forward to form a company and to sell shares worth $30 each to raise the deposit of $7,000. At a women’s liberation meeting on the 29 January it was decided to go ahead with this plan. The next day however, some WEL members expressed some reservations about the house and the financial commitment required and the plan was temporarily put on hold despite opposition from a number of women’s liberation members. In the words of Carol Ambrus:

We cannot afford the kind of negativism which says either ‘For this kind of money we can do better’ or ‘We cannot raise that kind of money in three months’... Such negativism can only result in apathy and who needs that, especially in International Women’s Year. We could make this house our project for the year and achieve something of lasting value to the movement. Without accommodation the survival of the movement in Canberra is seriously jeopardised.6

Eventually because WEL were not keen and because it required the commitment of both WEL and WL to be a viable prospect, it was decided not to purchase the Narrabundah house but to nonetheless seriously consider the possibility of buying a house by setting up a company and selling shares. It was also suggested that two other avenues be explored: erecting a modular house ($12,000) on land granted by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), or renting a government house cheaply in the ‘old Canberra’ area.7

In the months that followed, the Canberra women’s liberation group prepared a submission to rent a government house for use as a women’s centre similar to Bremer Street and to women’s centres in other Australian cities.8 The submission stated:

Canberra needs a Women’s Centre because feminism has, in five years, changed the whole political and social fabric of our society. The movement has always functioned on its own resources in terms of woman-power, money-raising and organizational skill. But these resources become dissipated to the point of uselessness when there is no central meeting point with the right atmosphere. The people of Canberra need a Women’s Centre, urgently.9

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7 Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, March, 1975, p. 2.
8 In the submission, the Adelaide Women’s House which is situated in the city centre and rented for only $18 a week, is cited as an example. ‘Submission to Mr Gordon Bryant M.P., Minister for the Capital Territory, for the Purpose of Continuing a Women’s Centre in Canberra’, April, 1975, p. 4.
9 ‘Submission to Mr Gordon Bryant M.P.’, p. 6.
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The house would provide a space for meetings, a drop-in centre, a women’s information service, a workshop for printing and silk screening, a book exchange and a library service. It was requested that the house be an ordinary three bedroom residence with a garage (or suitable workshop space) in a central location (near Civic), easily accessible by public transport.\(^{10}\)

The eight-page submission makes several references to the old Bremer Street women’s centre and yet there is no explanation as to why the premises were ‘recently vacated’.\(^ {11}\) The Bremer Street house is used by way of example in the submission to illustrate how the proposed centre will function. The centre, it is stated, will be run by the House Committee, representing all organisations and groups who use the centre; rent and running costs will be paid by members of the movement on a pledge basis and by collections at meetings; one bedroom will be allocated for a member to live in (at a low rent) in return for caretaking duties and to provide back up for the 24-hour women’s information service and drop-in centre.\(^ {12}\)

In May 1975 the WL submission was favourably received by the Minister for the Capital Territory, along with similar submissions from the Abortion Counselling Service (ACS) and WEL. And on Wednesday, 4 June, the tenancy of 3 Lobelia Street, O’Connor was offered to house the groups, who signed the lease the next day.

The contents of Bremer Street, which had been in storage in various locations throughout Canberra were moved into Lobelia Street the following weekend but as they only filled a small area of the new house, pleas were hastily issued for furniture donations for the centre. Lack of furniture notwithstanding, the Canberra women’s liberation group had their first meeting in the new house, on Wednesday 11 June, 1975. Loyal to the submission, one of the bedrooms of the new women’s centre was rented out to Ginny Ryan as the first official resident. Office equipment, files and the telephones for WL, WEL, ACS and WIS occupied a second bedroom and the third was used by ACS as a counselling room. The Feminist Book Exchange/Bookshop occupied the dining room and the living room was used for meetings.

The objectives of the new women’s centre, as stated in its constitution were:

1. To facilitate the raising of the status of women.
2. To work for the attainment of equal opportunity for women in all areas of activity.
3. To raise the status of work that women choose to undertake.

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\(^{10}\) ‘Submission to Mr Gordon Bryant M.P.’, p. 4.
\(^{11}\) ‘Submission to Mr Gordon Bryant M.P.’, p. 3.
\(^{12}\) ‘Submission to Mr Gordon Bryant M.P.’, p. 7.
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4. To create a point for dissemination of information to women about women.
5. To provide a centre of activity for other women's associations and groups whose objectives are in sympathy with this association.
6. To create and strengthen bonds between women and raise collective consciousness about the forces that shape their lives.\(^\text{13}\)

The enthusiasm that saw the signing of the lease for the new house at the beginning of the month was not, however, to last and by the end of the month general meeting attendance was poor. The July/August newsletter included the following statement and plea to the struggling Canberra movement:

SISTERS, WHERE ARE YOU? The struggle for liberation is far from over and unless we are prepared to settle for petty tokenism and reforms we need unity, sisterhood, involvement and of course to realise that the movement is what we make it. We are entirely responsible for what happens. We don't want to create guilt feelings in you, our sisters, but we also need support and to create this sisterly, non-oppressive sense of responsibility. Some of us have been involved in women's liberation only to the extent that we gained from it the emotional support that we needed in times of personal stress. We have then failed to give the same support to others. We are all sisters. Sisterhood is strength.\(^\text{14}\)

The plea meets with a limited response and the end of the year is witness to one last attempt to stop the tide of disintegration in the form of a combined 11-page newsletter produced by both WEL and WL. But in fact, the newsletter can be seen to illustrate how divided the overall movement had become, with separate listings for each group, each listing being indicative of a different set of issues and concerns. Whilst both groups include dates for AGMs, that is where the similarity ends. The WEL listing is concise and to the point, it includes dates for the WEL Annual Conference in Perth, the next Election/Lobby Action Group meeting and the next Child Care Action Group meeting. There is a sense of purpose and action to each inclusion. The WL listing for the same period is more comprehensive and eclectic, including meeting dates for: a discussion on rape; a report from the Feminist Anarchist Conference held in Canberra in September 1975; a discussion night of the Women's Child Care Collective on the hows, whys, problems, rewards, and values of setting up a creche in Stirling; a discussion night on 'Where has Sisterhood gone?' to talk about why there is alienation within the group and antagonism between the groups; and finally a meeting of the Women's Campaign Fund to decide what to do with the money that is left and to revise what they had done and whether it was ultimately successful.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) These objectives were later reprinted in the second edition of Wimminews, June, 1978, p. 3.

\(^{14}\) Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, July/August, 1975, p. 2.

In addition to the WL organised discussion night about alienation and antagonism between the groups, towards the end of the joint newsletter is a small section tentatively titled 'Grumble Corner'. 'Grumble Corner' was an attempt to create a space where women from both WEL and WL could voice justifiable criticisms as well as constructive suggestions as to how to improve that which is being criticised about any aspect of the groups' workings. It was suggested that these criticisms and suggestions for improvement be published in future editions of the newsletter. It appears as though the combined newsletter was intended as a continuing venture, and yet, the exercise was never repeated, each group picking up where they had left off with their separate newsletters. But whereas WEL was to continue its publication for many years, I have only been able to find evidence of two more editions of the Canberra Women's Liberation Newsletter, one in April–May, and the last in June 1976.

In April 1976, another publication titled Out from Under: A Journal of Women and Power was produced by a group of women calling themselves ‘Canberra Polemics’. These women wanted to open up a discussion in the Canberra movement about the complicity of women in maintaining the ‘status quo’ of patriarchy. For too long, they said, has men’s role in women’s oppression been given space in feminist publications. They declared that ‘to get out from under women themselves must change, and give up their silent conspiracy to their own victimisation’. The ‘journal’ contained a mixture of reprinted and original papers that illustrate the crossroads at which the women’s movement in Canberra found itself at in the mid 1970s.

The first of these papers was ‘Goodbye to All That? ... or I Never Go To Meetings Anymore’ by Helen Shepard which had originally been published in the Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter in November 1972. As one of the first serious statements about alienation in the movement it occupies a fundamental place in any history of the Canberra movement. Bringing together a number of questions about the aims of the movement, its strategy and what was happening in practice within it, the paper identifies many key problems and articulates for the first time the notion of an ‘invisible manifesto’. This manifesto was produced by a group of concerned women who met to try to define the censures that seemed to be operating at an unconscious level in the Canberra movement towards the end of 1972:

- Thou shalt be articulate
- Thou shalt not get pregnant

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➤ Thou shalt love thy sister before thy brother
➤ Thou shalt be ideologically sound even in bed
➤ Thou shalt not be a fulltime housewife
➤ Thou shalt be angry but not aggressive
➤ Thou shalt not be an emancipated woman\(^{18}\)
➤ Thou shalt not be sexually attracted to or live with a m.c.p.\(^{19}\) or a woman
➤ Thou shalt cope
➤ Thou shalt not be a glamorous lady
➤ Thou shalt not be immature
➤ Thy children shall be well adjusted
➤ Thou shalt not be too obtuse
➤ Thou shalt not be materialistic
➤ Thou shalt be ashamed of being selfish
➤ Thou shalt not be a reformist
➤ Thou shalt love spontaneously
➤ Thou shalt not be over emotional
➤ THOU SHALT JUDGE THY SISTER???\(^{20}\)

The aptly called 'invisible manifesto' indicates how impossible it seemed to be (to some women in the Canberra movement at least) to 'get it right'. As the movement progressed, so too did the list of unspoken requisites of a 'good' feminist. It is obvious from the eighth commandment 'Thou shalt not be sexually attracted to or live with a m.c.p. or a woman', that the question of lesbianism had arisen at some point but that it was not considered an appropriate option for group members in Canberra in 1972.

The second paper by Margo Collett, 'Is Momma Your Sister? or Enough Already of Victimisation', examines some of the themes raised in the much earlier 'Goodbye to All That? ...' paper. It develops a general analysis of the issue of power in the women's movement in Canberra and concludes with a personal strategy derived from it. Collett argues that in order to make sisterhood powerful, the movement needs to give up sisterhood as both victimhood and motherhood:

> We have to purge the sexism within us and its pursuit of powerlessness. We have to revolt against the hegemony of guilt. When we can do it we'll have something to

\(^{18}\) Odd as it may seem from today's perspective, in 1970s Canberra, the emancipated woman was considered antithetical to the notion of sisterhood because of her individual arrogance and lack of accord with the plight of other women.

\(^{19}\) M.C.P. was the often used acronym for male chauvinist pig.

\(^{20}\) Helen Shepard, 'Goodbye to All That? ... or I Never Go To Meetings Anymore', Out from Under: A Journal of Women and Power, Vol. 1, No. 1, April, 1976, pp. 4-5.
offer other women. I see this personal strategy as a means to arm ourselves for a political strategy of liberation which has so far eluded us.21

‘A Retrospective Rave on Labour and the Women’s Movement’ by Carol Ambrus makes up the third paper in the collection. Written with the help of ‘several gins, tonics, cigarettes and tears’22 on the morning after the landslide election which saw the Liberal Party elected in December 1975, this paper critiques some of the achievements of the movement and questions their value and the direction in which the movement has gone. She believes that it is imperative that the movement must seriously evaluate these efforts in terms of its long term goals if it is to progress in any real sense. Ambrus suggests that the women’s movement has been unwittingly coerced into passivity and indolence by handouts from the Labour government, or as she puts it by their ‘flirtation with the patriarchy over the last few years’.23 The deployment, subversion, fragmentation and co-option of the movement at the hands of the Labour Party should, she says, have taught them one crucial thing, ‘that no male dominated system will countenance an independent women’s movement no matter how benevolent that system appears to be’.24 Ambrus’s solution? She maintains:

We must seize what little independence we can muster and take control of our own lives at all levels of society from participating in ‘high level’ decision making to the taking of our own pap smears.25

The last paper in the journal, also by Carol Ambrus, is titled ‘Individuality and the Women’s Movement’. This revised version of a paper circulated at the Feminist Anarchist Conference in 1975 is a plea for the movement to re-examine its position on leadership and individual initiative. Ambrus talks about the poor reception of the Canberra movement to the ‘invisible manifesto’ in 1972 which resulted in the issues being ‘clothed in silence’.26 The analysis of the Canberra movement offered by Ambrus is, in part, not dissimilar to the sentiments expressed in Joreen’s US-based article, ‘Tyranny of Structurelessness’, although if it has influenced her thoughts, it is not

mentioned in the paper.27 On a wider scale, Ambrus asserts that 'the movement has used destructive criticism of others as a tool to maintain positions of (unacknowledged) power and dominance'.28 The issues have not changed in four years, she says, and now in 1976 it is imperative that they be addressed if the movement doesn't wish to alienate women from joining.

The mid-1970s in Canberra, it would seem, witnessed a period of re-evaluation and speculation about where the women's movement was going – if indeed it was going anywhere. In 1977, women's liberationist, Susan Eade, described the situation as she saw it:

The [women's] movement has grown large. It has diversified. It has become a vital necessity to a great many women in this city. Yet the predominant temper in the women's movement in Canberra during 1976 has reflected neither complacency about this state of affairs, nor the excitement, anger, and sense of urgency which contributed to achieving it. Rather, the prevailing mood has been bewildered, irritated, and weary. And the Canberra women's liberation group has disappeared.29

In retrospect, it is possible to view the demise of Bremer Street as marking the beginning of the demise of women's liberation, as such, in Canberra. Despite valiant attempts to consolidate the movement, the eventual move into Lobelia Street eventually witnessed the splintering of women's liberation into special interest groups and organisations. It is frequently assumed that this splintering was in effect the final separation of WEL from WL, but such an analysis of the situation, whilst neat, is too simplistic and serves, unjustifiably, to condemn WL to the scrapheap of second wave feminism as the group which didn't survive. It is difficult to write a history of WL in the way it is possible to write one of WEL simply because WL was not structured in such a way that it could survive as a continuing organisation with a particular agenda. As time passed, the objectives of WL changed, as did the women involved. The turnover of both members and ideology in WL was more varied than in WEL, and ultimately could not be maintained under its original WL label and definition. Put quite simply, the splintering of the WL movement that happened in Canberra in the mid-to-late 1970s would not have happened if WL had not existed for the previous five years.

27 Joreen (Jo Freeman), 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' in Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone (eds), Radical Feminism, Quadrangle, New York, 1973.


29 Susan Eade (Magarey), 'And Now We Are Six: A Plea for Women's Liberation', Refractory Girl, No. 13-14, March, 1977, p. 3.
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The history of the movement’s formative years and its eventual splintering is a crucial part of the recent feminist past and, in this history, plays a crucial role in understanding how Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community came to exist. The early Women’s Liberation Movement in Canberra ultimately provided the impetus for a number of lesbian and feminist groups, organisations, refuges, courses and actions to emerge, many of which still exist today almost a quarter of a century later; and it was via these avenues that all of the narrators subsequently became involved in Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. In spite of the disillusion and confusion found in the Canberra movement in the mid-1970s, it was during this period that this disparate collection of feminist organisations and activities began to take root in the wider community. After several years feminist agitation, for example, 1976 witnessed the birth of Women’s Studies at the ANU.

The arrival of women’s studies

By the mid 1970s the Women’s Liberation Movement had made itself felt throughout Australia. International Women’s Year in 1975 had seen feminist demands well and truly injected into the public realm. The responses by ANU students in 1975 as to whether Women’s Studies should be offered, what it should contain, who should teach it and who should study it, serve to illustrate what kinds of feminist issues were prominent and widespread in Canberra at the time. A part-time male student made the following enlightened comments in support of the introduction of a Women’s Studies course at the ANU:

The role, status and rights of women in society is receiving increasing attention in a political sense. However, there is little indication that these subjects are being discussed rationally and without prejudice. The impact of changes facing women in society, role conflicts, the care of children, of working mothers; the differences in attitude among women in different socio-economic groups in regard to women’s role, right, obligations and so on all appear significant areas of study.  

Other comments by two full-time female students are cautious about the specifics of teaching Women’s Studies although both believe that feminism should be incorporated into the tertiary sphere. One of the students suggests that it may be ‘[b]etter to incorporate the women’s aspect into existing courses, because to have a separate course could lead to it becoming “female chauvinistic”’ but adds that in the event a Women’s Studies course was introduced it would be important to ‘let the men

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in [because] part of the idea is to present women's aspects, and it seems to defeat the purpose if men are excluded.' 31 The other student similarly opines that 'a course taught by women only, studied only by women and with its context chosen only by women would become narrow, biased and altogether begin to resemble other units taught at this university which are biased and narrow in the other direction'. She, however, goes on to make suggestions for what such a course should include: `1. History from the women's perspective; 2. Study of women authors. Playwrights, poets etc in an English course; 3. Psychological make up and study of women; 4. Biology of women.' 32

The overall results of this 1975 student opinion survey about the need for Women's Studies at the ANU revealed that:

There is general support by most students that a separate women [studies] course should be organized. By and large there is little difference of opinion by sex, academic status, and course attended. However, it should be noted that full-time students are more supportive of a programme than part-timers, the figure being 73% and 62% respectively.

There is little support for the suggestion that the content of such a course be determined, taught, or attended only by women. Any differences by sex, status, classification or course attended by student were quite small, and merit little attention.

Roughly about one-fourth of the students said they would attend such a course, almost a third said they definitely would not, and almost one-half were uncertain. There were interesting differences in these figures when examined by respondent characteristics. Females, for example, were both more predisposed to attending and were also the most uncertain about their possible attendance. 33

With sufficient student and staff support in evidence, the first Women's Studies position at the ANU was drafted and approved in July 1975. Following the advertisement of the position of 'Lecturing Fellow in Women's Studies' the electoral committee met on 23 October 1975 to consider the twelve applications received, five of which were from overseas scholars. Applicants ranged in age from 27 to 39 and listed their current positions variously as: Asst. Professor, Lecturer, (Senior) Tutor, Teaching Asst., Researcher and Unemployed.34 The first lecturer in Women's Studies at the ANU - historian, Ann Curthoys - took up her appointment in January 1976. She was the first in a long line of committed and dedicated feminist staff members to be appointed in

31 Saha, 'Women's Studies Programme', p. 4.
32 Saha, 'Women's Studies Programme', p. 5.
34 This information is taken from a range of ANU documents and memorandums I currently have in my possession.
the 25+ years since its inception. Whilst the varied experiences of both staff and students still await a historian, the impact of Women’s Studies on many Australian women’s lives cannot be denied. Of the eight narrators, for example, six were involved with Women’s Studies in some way. Teresa’s involvement with Women’s Studies was not via the ANU but through Hawker College where she was among one of the first groups of students to be able to do Women’s Studies as a secondary student. And although Kate never actually took a Women’s Studies course, she was involved in the protests that led to it being taught at the ANU. Four other narrators, Leigh, Dee, Erin and Jocelyn, all enrolled in Women’s Studies at the ANU and were, to varying degrees, influenced by that experience. Fuller versions of the narrators’ experiences are included in the personal narratives section of this history.

Wimminews: A new mouthpiece for a new movement

In terms of feminist publications in Canberra, the year 1977 was a quiet one. The demise of the Bremer Street women’s centre had been quickly followed by the demise of a specifically WL-oriented newsletter. Canberra Polemic’s Out from Under journal was never repeated with nothing else filling the void until Wimminews. Wimminews was the result of a women’s centre collective meeting in April 1978 to talk about the possibility of some sort of feminist publication for the centre. Even though some of the groups associated with the centre had their own specific newsletters, it was thought that a more general feminist newsletter would be useful as many Canberra women ‘don’t know what’s going on in the movement here, let alone the rest of Australia or

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36 The ACT-WEL newsletter was published during this time but this was not WL as such.
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Indeed the world.37 This was a movement that had grown beyond all expectations in eight years; a movement that now consisted of so many diverse groupings that it was hard to recognise it as the close knit group that began meeting in each other’s homes. And yet, it undeniably had its roots in that original group and the Bremer Street groups that followed soon after. This was still, in an increasingly amorphous form, the Women’s (Liberation) Movement in Canberra.38

The two big ‘public’ issues of the women’s movement in Australia in 1978 were abortion and peace. Australian feminists nationwide mobilised around the introduction of repressive anti-abortion legislation in New Zealand in April that year as well as demonstrating against Fred Nile’s infamous ‘Festival of Light’.39

Demonstrations opposing anti-abortion legislation were not a new phenomenon in Australia however. There had been a number of protests in prior years as well as a National Conference on Abortion and Contraception in Sydney in 1975. The Abortion Counselling Service in Canberra was operational as early as 1973. And the Sydney-based Women’s Abortion Action Campaign (WAAC) was founded


38 It is difficult, but not impossible, given the changing identity inherent in the language used by these groups to describe themselves, to trace a lineage between the early Women’s Liberation group and this later collective which talked of a women’s movement but not Women’s Liberation as such.

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in August 1972. Abortion as a ‘woman’s right to choose’ has always been on the
women’s movement’s agenda, but there are times when it is more prominent than
others. In Australia 1978 was one of those times.

Similar to the abortion issue, many women have been drawn to the peace movement
and to peace activism more generally. This is especially evident in second wave
feminism where a number of women’s peace camps – in particular, Greenham
Common – have gained international recognition. In Canberra, 1978 marked the
beginning of feminist organising around environmental and peace issues when a
number of women contacted the women’s centre interested in joining or starting up a
cell of Women Against Nuclear Energy (WANE). In October these women met
together to discuss uranium mining, the environment and the kind of society a nuclear
future would enforce. The enthusiastic outcome of the meeting, combined with the
insights gained at the Feminism and Uranium Conference held in Melbourne, 19-20
August, saw a women’s collective (the ‘Women and Energy’ group) formed to
‘encourage as many women as possible to actively participate in the fight for a non-
nuclear, non-sexist society’. For one of the narrators, Leigh, peace activism with other
women marked her entry into grass roots feminist organising in the early 1980s:

Lots of the things I did were around women and the peace movement, and the
women-only things I did like that. We did lots of street theatre, we wrote songs
and did performances in town and civic and at marches ... but they were all around
belonging to the women’s peace movement. The camp outside the Defence Offices,
we camped there and we camped outside Parliament House. And they were all
very woman-centred things – they weren’t lesbian things but of course there were
lots of lesbians there. But they were all the peace movement ... That was a big deal,
there were always lots of conferences and people would come from all around and
there would be parties and things like that.

In the two year pause between newsletters, from mid 1976 to mid 1978, it would seem
that the situation of lesbians connected to feminist activities in Canberra changed for
the better. The first issues of the new newsletter, Wimminews, matter-of-factly included
information about lesbian meetings and social gatherings. The inclusion of lesbian-

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40 Verity Burgmann argues that the contemporary peace movement has a far greater proportion of
women activists than any other political movement. Verity Burgmann, Power and Protest: Movements for

41 I do not mean to imply here that women have only become interested in significant numbers in peace
activism via feminist involvement since the 1970s as this would serve to deny the existence and
continuing success of organisations like the Women’s Peace Army and the Women’s International
League for Peace and Freedom some sixty years earlier.


43 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
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oriented materials remained a feature of *Wimminews* throughout its long existence and it was often said, assumed, or understood, by those who subscribed to it that *Wimminews* was really Canberra’s lesbian newsletter in all but name. That the newsletter was originally produced by a small collective of radical feminist women may go some way towards explaining the new unapologetic inclusion of lesbian activities and events in its listings. The youngest of the narrators, Teresa, recalls that it was through reading her mother’s copy of *Wimminews* that she was able to find out about what was happening in Canberra in the ‘women’s scene’ in the late 1970s.  

By May 1978 a substantial shift had occurred in the Canberra movement. With no documentation in the form of newsletters of those who were involved with WL (rather than WEL) during this period, it remains a matter of speculation based on anecdotal evidence as to what actually happened to initiate and enact these changes. Was this in part a result of the lesbian visibility upheaval surrounding the International Women’s Year conference? It is possible that this sparsely documented period witnessed the almost complete replacement of early women’s liberationists with an influx of younger more radical women, many of whom became lesbians? At this time in Canberra the majority of lesbians involved in feminist activities were those who had come to identify as lesbians via their involvement with feminism. There is little documentary evidence to suggest that significant numbers of women who lived as lesbians prior to (or alongside) the emergence of women’s liberation in Canberra became involved in any significant way in feminism at this time although it wouldn’t be much longer before these two worlds collided. Marian Paull’s experience of trying to get involved in Canberra women’s liberation in 1970 (as included in Chapter Three) illustrates how unaccepting the Canberra movement was towards lesbians during its formative years. In Chapter Six, two of the narrators, Pat and Kate, describe how it was that their relationship, which began in 1979, came to be known as Canberra’s first ‘mixed marriage’ of a ‘disco dyke’ and a ‘leso fem’.

The first issues of *Wimminews* in mid-1978, as mentioned above, contained a significant amount of information about activities of potential interest to lesbians. National events of interest to lesbians advertised in the newsletter included the Sydney Lesbian-Feminist Conference which was scheduled to take place on 10-11 June, the International Homosexual Solidarity March on 24 June in Sydney and the 4th National Homosexual Conference in Sydney on 25-27 August.  

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44 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
lesbians are reported to have been among the 200 or so who attended the Lesbian Feminist Conference in Sydney in June. The conference was organised around workshop topics with a concert on the Saturday night. Each workshop session was opened with an introductory paper on the specified topic and was followed by general discussion. Scheduled workshops included: ‘Lesbianism within the Feminist movement’; ‘Lesbian mothers’; ‘Separatism’; and ‘Violence and tactics’ as well as two late additions on ‘Relationships’ and ‘Lesbians in prison’.

Locally, lesbian group meetings were advertised as happening on various evenings before settling into a fortnightly Thursday 7.30pm time slot. Arguably, this lesbian group marked the more tangible emergence of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. It is hard to know if the Lesbian Group referred to in the first issue of Wimminews had been meeting prior to May 1978 or whether it was a newly formed group. Given the fluctuating meeting times over the first few advertised weeks, from Wednesday to Saturday and finally Thursday, it would be reasonable to assume that these were early days for the group and a meeting time that suited all those interested was in the process of being worked out. And indeed a report from the group in the third issue of the newsletter supports this:

There now exists a Lesbian Group in Canberra. We see the group as fulfilling two functions –

1) as a contact point for lesbians all over Canberra, so we can provide support for each other;

2) as a forum for lesbians to get together, discuss and act around our collective needs and interests.46

One of the group’s first big efforts was to organise a ‘Lesbiindependence Day’ on the weekend of the 7-8 October. The impetus behind the ‘day’, which in actual fact consisted of two afternoons and an evening, are stated as follows:

- To meet each other. We know there are lots of lesbians in Canberra. We ourselves want to break out of the confining patterns caused by our society; the pattern of being fearful, of hiding ourselves away, of mixing only with a small group (ghetto?) of lesbians, or in some cases of being completely isolated. The lesbians we’ve met through the group feel the same, and we think others probably do too.

- To talk with each other. Exchange experiences and feelings about what it is like to be a lesbian with heterosexual friends, with our families, at work, with other lesbians and in society generally. What can we do to change the things we don’t like about how society treats us? How fundamental is our

position to the way society works? Will the changes be easy to make or will they have to be profound and radical?

- To enjoy being together. Experience together our collective strength, solidarity, individuality and independence.47

Towards the end of 1978 Canberra’s relatively new lesbian group fell into difficulties with progressively fewer women turning up to meetings. A meeting was scheduled for 9 November to discuss whether the group should officially disband or whether it should consider a new format. Should it be more socially, politically or support oriented? There was concern that if the group did cease to meet it would have made it even harder for lesbians in Canberra to find one another. Open discussion of these issues in the group and in Wimminews had served an important purpose and regardless of whether or not the group disbanded, a sense of lesbian (feminist) community had been born and permeated many feminist groups and organisations in Canberra.48 As it turned out, however, the decrease in numbers at Lesbian Group meetings was not the only problem at the Lobelia Street women’s house. Enthusiasm was on the wane in a number of other groups, including community radio 2XX’s women’s programmes.

In the 1970s and 1980s, 2XX, Canberra’s community radio station, was an important site of political activism. Located on the ANU campus it was a handy mouthpiece for many alternative causes and movements, women’s and gay liberation amongst them. The volunteer base of 2XX, not surprisingly, consisted primarily of students. In the late 1970s and well into the 1980s, the location, the high student involvement, and the outspoken feminist stance of the paid office workers, contributed to 2XX becoming one of the few known places in Canberra where lesbian (feminist)s could meet other like-minded souls. Certainly, when I returned to Canberra in 1988 after a few year’s absence, it was where I reconnected with the lesbian (feminist) community. Two of the narrators, Erin and Jocelyn, similarly recall that their introduction to Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community in the early 1980s was through 2XX. ‘I started to get involved in university politics and as a consequence of that I found my way down to 2XX’, Erin explains. ‘I did a radio training course, and there were lesbians everywhere down there. There were just lesbians everywhere’.49

47 Wimminews, September, 1978, p. 3.
49 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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The decline in enthusiasm in the women's movement in Canberra in the late 1970s coincided with financial difficulties within its ranks. January 1979 saw the arrival of a letter from the Health Commission announcing the discontinuation of the Lobelia Street women's house and the Women's Health and Information Service grant. Fortunately the loss of funding had been anticipated in December and a roster of volunteers to run the centre had been drawn up and was promptly put into effect. A meeting to discuss how to raise money to keep Lobelia Street functioning took place on 17 January and a pledge system was re-instated. Total expenditure for the year was estimated at about $4,000 with $2,000 coming in from membership fees and rent; $1,000 of the $2,000 shortfall had already been pledged by February but the remaining $1,000 was nonetheless a concern and pleas for further pledges continued.

The financial problems may well have provided a much needed impetus to Canberra women and the early months of 1979 saw a resurgence of feminist energies at Lobelia Street. Planning for a huge IWD celebration of poetry, music, concerts, stalls and art, which coincided with Canberra Week, was underway. A petition to the House of Representatives demanding access for women to medical abortion services was produced and circulated. Women began meeting in February to organise the 1979 Canberra Women's Film Festival and there were tentative steps made towards setting up a 'Women's Rights and Feminist Lawyers Group'. There were, as well, the usual selection of meetings and gatherings of groups like: WEL, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC), Abortion Counselling Service (ACS), Women's Union Collective, Women's Art Registry, Women's Legal Network, and the women's centre house collective and on the social side of things, a Sydney wimmins rock 'n' roll band, 'Sheila' played in Canberra for the first time. As yet there were no local women's bands but they and women's theatre would soon make their debut in Canberra.

Canberra's struggling Lesbian Group took the time to re-evaluate its options and became the Lavender Lounge, a gathering which took place every second Saturday in the month beginning 10 February. The group welcomed all women but, like a number of the groups at the time, was predominantly made up of lesbians. Of the eight narrators, only Kate remembers frequenting the Lavender Lounge which she recalls was 'much more welcoming' than the lesbian community in Canberra had become in the 1990s. Kate was also involved in a Canberra-based Rouge collective that was set up following the circulation of the first edition of Rouge which declared itself to be the Australian Feminist Newspaper. The Canberra Rouge collective almost certainly

50 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
witnessed narrators, Kate and Teresa, meeting for the first time as Kate was on the original Rouge collective and Teresa turned up to one of the early production meetings of the Canberra issue. Neither one specifically remembers the names of those in the collective although Teresa vividly remembers that she soon left the meeting because she felt unwelcomed by the women there who she describes as ‘older dykes’.

Despite the seemingly busy agenda, however, seeds of discontent were once again lurking beneath the surface of the Canberra Women’s Liberation Movement. In August 1979 the newsletter posed a series of questions about the future of the Lobelia Street House, the future of feminism in Canberra, the future of patriarchal civilisation and women’s fate in it and the possibility of caring, sharing, love, growth and sisterhood. Covering a broad spectrum of problems inherent in the current movement it also referred to an earlier ‘wimmin’s house’ brawl, the relationship between man-hating and feminism, the lack of group gratitude and graciousness, and women’s apathy in general towards the Lobelia Street women’s house. It noted too the difficulties involved in funding feminist projects, the complexities inherent in women’s relationships and values, and the negativity seemingly inherent in feminist ideology. It asked what the meaning of sisterhood really was as it was currently practiced. In short, as the following long excerpt indicates, the Canberra movement was once again in crisis:

What is the point of women’s liberation in Canberra? Who drinks from those waters? How real is the movement? Jean is WEL. Maeve is the House Committee and she does just about all of the shit-work that is going as well. How often has this newsletter only come out because she was willing to do it? Collectively speaking, how many times would she not have been quite justified in serving up Wimminews as 4 blank pages except that she has too much love and caring to do so? Maeve, the drop-out, the dole-bludger who is, constantly, so busy that she has currently to flee for a holiday or drop from nervous exhaustion. Rape Crisis is Debbie and Julia. Of course these are over-simplifications but the truth is there, nevertheless and we all know it ... And what the hell is it all for? No-one likes the Women’s House or likes to go there. No-one defends it. It is an ugly, damp monocrete hulk which is cold, cold, cold, always both physically and spiritually. It’s horrible. We should do away with it. It is an inefficient, half-hearted service centre that has lost its moral core, if it ever had one.

These pages of disillusionment and resentment expressed so rawly shifted the discontent about the state of the women’s movement in Canberra from beneath the surface into the public realm. The following month’s newsletter addressed many of the issues raised the previous month and suggested a new way forward:

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51 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
52 Wimminews, August, 1979, p. 3.
We’ve got to be diligent ... There are too many pressures from without and within trying to crack the unity of sisterhood and our purpose. Too often we break under these pressures and allow the negativity in. All the altruism, love, support, action, dissolve in anger and desperation. We are at that dissolved, lost stage now. How do we extricate ourselves? Lobelia St., for a start, holds too many ghosts. It’s an unloved and unloving place. We need a new home, women. Health and Info. service, ACS, Rape Crisis etc should all continue in a new, warm house. It should be an organised (oops, there it is; I can’t help it. I believe in the power of it) contact point. WEL, Women’s Art Registry, Women and Environment, Women and Unemployment, Women On Campus [WOC], Rouge Collective and any other women’s groups should all make a new home there... I suppose what I’m saying is that we should take one deep breath, muster all our energies, set up a new place and get activity going... So what it boils down to, sisters, is do we take control of the situation now, or do we let things die a graceful death...

Canberra was not the only place in Australia to be experiencing a crisis of disillusion at this time. In 1979, collective members of Sydney’s Women’s Liberation House, for example, reported: ‘the house is at a crisis which has been brought on by too few women having to do too bloody much. Sound familiar?54 And also in Sydney, a paper titled ‘Rampant Non-Involv[elment]’ two Elsie refuge workers wrote:

Over the past 12 months we have had the following experiences & we are fucking angry ... It gives us the shits that no-one except a few friends support us – or for that matter any other feminist demo ... Who cares? We feel that this lack of support is indicative of the non-communication & non-involv[elment] rampant in the Wimmins Movement at the present time.55

Huge rifts appeared in the women’s movement all over Australia as different factions continued to fight for funding whilst others continued to insist that government funding was nothing short of co-option by the State and signalled the end of women’s liberation. Equally explosive in the movement during this period was the question of whether women should get involved in ‘male parliamentary ... and political systems’.56

In November 1979, at a meeting of the Lesbian Action Group (LAG) in Melbourne, one member turned up dressed in black, to symbolically present a wreath to the meeting. The note attached to the wreath began with the words: ‘In anticipation of the passing of the Women’s Liberation Movement ...’.57 She, like many other feminists throughout Australia, was opposed to the suggested participation of women in the United Nations Mid-Decade for Women Conference which was in planning to be held in Canberra the

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53 Wimminews, September, 1979, p. 5.
56 Wimminews, December, 1979, p. 3.
57 Wimminews, December, 1979, p. 3.
following March. Such participation, in their view, would result in co-opting and weakening the movement.

The troubles that had plagued the Canberra movement throughout parts of 1978 and 1979 had subsided by the end of the year. A meeting of the Lobelia Street women's house collective on 12 December talked about ways of creating a 'new' women's centre at the same premises. The (unexpected) continued government funding of the ACS and CRCC to a joint total of $9,000 provided the financial means by which the centre could try again. The space at Lobelia Street was re-arranged in order to better accommodate WEL, which as one of the three rent paying groups, felt it deserved better office space than the laundry where it was currently situated. The centre organised itself to have two office rooms to be shared by four groups - the fourth being a women's liberation switchboard; the third bedroom would function as a shared private space/counselling room; whilst the meeting area, bookshop and gestetner areas remained the same. The Lobelia Street women's centre continued to survive in much the same turbulent fashion for another fourteen years. And despite its turbulent history, its role as the geographical centre of Canberra's women's movement should not be underestimated.

The emergence of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra

The existence of women's liberation in Canberra in the 1970s, in conjunction with a wider feminist network both nationally and overseas, provided the environment necessary for a multitude of feminist endeavours to emerge and thrive. From the early 1970s and continuing into the 1980s (and 1990s) a variety of Women's Services were established in Canberra, amongst them: ACS; CRCC; the Canberra Incest Centre (now merged with CRCC); the Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS); and various women's refuges including the Canberra Women's Refuge, Beryl, Toora Single Women's Shelter, Medea (now Inanna Inc Women's Shelter), Doris Woman's Refuge, and Lowanna Young Women's Refuge. Of the eight narrators, six - Leigh, Dee, Pat, Kate, Emma and Erin - became involved in the establishment of one or the other of these services or refuges and at the time of the interviews in 1994, four of the six were still working in that area. Feminism has also made a significant impact on education in Canberra with the introduction of Australia's second tertiary level Women's Studies course at the ANU in 1976, as well as the introduction of Women's Studies at a secondary level (Years 11 and 12) at Hawker College in 1978. As mentioned earlier, these courses have had a lasting influence on many of the narrators.

Additional to the appearance of feminist-initiated and inspired courses, organisations, groups, and services throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but no less important, was the
gradual emergence of a feminist-oriented social scene organised by women for women. Being a women’s liberationist was not all about fighting the feminist fight. It was also quite simply about enjoying the company of, and having fun with, other like-minded women. In the early days of women’s liberation, consciousness-raising created a space where women could connect on both personal and political levels. CR was often emotional, frequently challenging, sometimes painful, and occasionally downright hilarious. For many women long lasting friendships were forged in CR groups that continue to the present. Gradually, however, as the interest in and need for CR decreased, other forms of organised social interaction took its place.

In Canberra, unlike other larger urban centres and probably in part because of the lesser size of the feminist community, the social network crossed political allegiances. Marxist, socialist, anarchist, liberal, lesbian and radical feminists alike operated out of the same premises, went to the same local and interstate conferences organised by WL and WEL, and more often than not attended the same social functions. In Australia, apart from the very occasional gathering like the Sorrento Radicalesbian Conference, it wasn’t really until the mid-to-late 1970s that women’s liberation at a national level had really grown big enough to support separate conferences and gatherings around specific political agenda’s.

Whilst in the early 1970s conferences were primarily organised by WEL or women’s liberation, the mid-1970s witnessed conferences were organised by a variety of different groups. These included: the first National Women’s Conference on Feminism and Socialism in Melbourne in October 1974; the Australian Union of Students (AUS) Women’s Conference in Canberra in November 1974; a weekend seminar called ‘Anarchism & Feminism’ in Canberra in January 1975; the Women’s Abortion Action Campaign (WAAC) national conference on Abortion and Contraception in Sydney in June 1975. Australia’s first Women’s Studies Conference hosted by Flinders University was held in June 1975; and the IWY Women and Politics Conference was held in Canberra in August 1975. Other conferences held in the second half of 1975 included: the ‘Women and Madness’ Conference in Melbourne, the ‘Women’s Health in a Changing Society’ Conference in Brisbane, and the first National Conference on Anarchist Feminism in Canberra. In February 1976, a regional Lesbian Conference was held in Melbourne and Sydney Rape Crisis held a conference the following month; a weekend long ‘All Women Festival’ was held in Derby, Tasmania in April 1976; the Australian Women’s Trade Union Conference was held in Sydney in August 1976; and in October 1976 a ‘Feminism and Sexuality’ Conference was held in Melbourne.

By the late 1970s the feminist conference schedule had grown further still with several conferences a month being held across Australia, and several of which, some of the narrators remembered attending or helping to organise. Some of the more notable

Increasingly throughout Australia as the numbers of active feminists grew, and more ideological positions were formulated, women began to socialise more exclusively with others who shared their political viewpoint. There were always, however, social events that appealed to a majority of feminists regardless of their particular politics. Performers like Robyn Archer, for example, were never short of a feminist following. 58

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Figure 30 ‘We see music and singing as an important means of communication and its essential that feminists have their own type of music, about, and for, women. We definitely feel that its vital to bring over the fact that we’re lesbians, singing lesbian songs.’


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58 Robyn Archer’s Pack of Women shows performed to full houses throughout Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A significant proportion of the audience were feminists.
In Canberra the feminist population was never large enough to support the separate organising of social events based on and attended only by those of a particular political persuasion. In late 1970s and early 1980s Canberra when women’s dances, women’s theatre and women’s bands became part of the rapidly expanding feminist social scene, such events were attended by women regardless of their feminist identity and beliefs. This social space was reserved for fun, not fights. It was in this environment that the lesbian (feminist) community came to exist in Canberra.

The second national women’s liberation conference held in Sydney in June 1972; the Hobart Women’s Action Group (HWAG) paper presented at the Mt Beauty conference in January 1973; and the Radicalesbian conference in July 1973 (discussed in Chapter Two); are all pivotal moments in the history of Australia’s recent lesbian (feminist) past. The papers presented by members of Sydney’s Gay Liberation Movement at the WL conference in 1972 marked the entry of the lesbian issue into the national women’s liberation agenda; the presentation of ‘Sexism and Women’s Liberation or ... “Why do straight sisters sometimes cry when they are called lesbians?” at Mt Beauty marked the first national signs of internal distress of lesbians within the women’s movement in Australia; and the Sorrento Radicalesbian conference marks the first national occasion in Australia where lesbians collectively and publicly prioritised lesbianism as a political organising strategy. Both of these incidents happened because lesbians who had been involved with feminism chose to disrupt or organise themselves in spaces ‘outside’ of ‘feminism’; they were justifiably angry and chose to prioritise lesbianism over feminism. Moments like these occurred more and more frequently throughout the mid-to-late 1970s and early 1980s in Australia creating a space in which it was possible for a wider lesbian (feminist) community to emerge.

In Canberra from the early-to-mid 1970s onwards, any woman who began to search in any conscious sense for other lesbians would almost certainly end up finding the ever-so-slightly-lesbian-tinged feminist community; and from the mid-to-late 1970s, the feminist-tinged lesbian community. The constantly evolving women’s movement was one of the few places where lesbianism was being talked about in positive terms. Feminists were the only ones organising large-scale women-only social events and dances; and whilst such social events were rarely advertised as ‘lesbian’ they were predominantly attended by lesbians. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, even those lesbians who may have been fortunate enough to find a few other like-minded souls in workplaces, like the armed services or the Australian Public Service, tended at some point or another to gravitate towards the lesbian (feminist) community because it was the only public lesbian community available in Canberra. Women who chanced upon the gay community in Canberra were also likely to search out the lesbian (feminist)
PART II. TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LESBIAN (FEMINIST) COMMUNITY IN CANBERRA

community because it proved hard, if not impossible, to meet new women in a gay community that was small and male-heavy.

In Part III of this history, based on the oral narratives of the eight women I interviewed in 1994, I provide a historical mosaic of the narrators’ experiences as they unwittingly journeyed towards and helped maintain Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to illustrating how important time, place and political enviroment are to individual experiences, and building on the history contained in Part II of ‘She Gave Me That Look’, the personal narratives that follow provide specific testimony about:

- the process involved in becoming sexual and taking on a sexual identity;
- the ways in which sexual identity, as a ‘choice’, is dependent on and influenced by contemporaneous representations and expectations; and
- the complexities involved in negotiating one’s sexuality in different communities which have their own sets of prescriptive rules and regulations.
PART III

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
Chapter Five

Parallel Lives: accounts of sexual exploration and same sex desire in the 1960s and 1970s

My objective in this chapter is to re-create a sexualised version of the past from the combined experiences of the narrators prior to each of them coming into direct contact with feminism as it existed in its various forms in Canberra during the period 1970-84. Although none of the narrators were actually involved in the early years of women’s liberation in Canberra all of them came into contact with some sort of feminist organising there between the years 1974 and 1984. The impact of this contact varies greatly from individual to individual, as does the time when the contact initially occurred and the age of the narrator at that time, but in all cases it results in the narrator becoming involved with Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. Whilst the relationship between lesbianism and feminism, as it was experienced by the narrators, is primarily explored in the following chapter, the narratives of those who came out into Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) environment are included in the section on coming out included at the end of this chapter. Six of the eight narrators came out as lesbians because of their contact with feminism, or because feminism provided them an environment in which they could come out.

This chapter opens with a section based on the narrators’ memories about their first awareness of homosexuality and/or lesbianism. It is followed by a section on the early or first sexual experiences of the narrators. These experiences are not limited to same-sex exploration but were all relayed in the larger context of the journey towards discovering, choosing or identifying as lesbians. Almost all of the narrators offered information on these topics and it is their stories and their interpretations of these experiences, that appear here. The only narrator who did not volunteer information was Pat, who came to lesbianism as an adult and who did not mention any same-sex childhood or adolescent crushes or experiences.

The inclusion of these pre-feminist experiences in this history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra is important. The narrators’ stories clearly illustrate how little their sexual explorations and experiences in 1970s Australia were affected by the
emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement and debates about lesbianism within the Women's Liberation Movement. The campaign against the medicalisation of homosexuality in Sydney in 1972 had no impact of their lives; nor did the first national (radical) lesbian conference held in Sorrento in 1973. Closer to Canberra, the presentation of the controversial lesbian paper at the 1973 Mt Beauty conference did not feature in any of the narrator's stories. The narrator's accounts of sexual exploration and same sex desire indicate that the existence of liberation-based activism did not automatically and immediately equate with liberation for all. Their personal struggles alert us to the dangers of assuming that activist-based histories are sufficient in and of themselves. Much can be learnt from looking beyond these histories to the lives of those who weren't involved in the original movements and who struggled alone with their sexuality at the very same time that the liberation movements were in full flight. In this chapter, the stories of the narrators are prioritised and contrasted against the activist-based content of the previous three chapters.

Those who did not offer information relevant to this chapter were not pressed for it. All of the narrators were asked the same set of open-ended questions, and it was left to them to decide what information to impart. This does not mean, for example, in the section 'Discovering Sex: Early or First Consensual Sexual Experiences' that those narrators whose experiences are not included in detail did not experiment sexually as children or adolescents. This is rather to reiterate the parameters of this research which included only one interview with each woman, and which did not include approaching the narrators at a later date for either clarity or expansion.

Feeling different: early knowledge of lesbianism

A sense of somehow being or feeling 'different' during one's childhood is a common factor in the coming out stories of many lesbians. According to research done by English sociologist, Ken Plummer, the most frequent beginning to coming out stories includes some reference to this sense of difference or a feeling of not belonging. Bonita Ann Palmer's contribution to Anne Mackay's Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian and Gay Experiences 1930-1990 provides such an example:

I always had a sense of being different. In school, at the age of seven or eight, when the 'cool' people get sorted out from the 'not so cool', I remember being called a

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faggot and a queer. The Words lezzie and dyke didn’t surface until I was about 10 years old ... I felt different - I never aspired to get married and have kids.²

Similarly, Belfast-born Heather Savage, says of her childhood:

I discovered that my orientation was different from other girls' when I was eight or nine, if not earlier ... wherever I went, whoever I mixed with, and whatever I did, I always felt like the outsider, the one who didn’t fit. I knew why I was different, but I could not accept being so very different.³

Three of the narratives that follow here support Plummer’s findings although of all the narrators, only one, Emma, recollects experiencing an acute feeling of ‘sexual’ difference throughout her childhood. She was the oldest of the narrators and the one who ‘accepted’ that she was a lesbian at the youngest age. Emma’s experience of coming out was in the 1960s whereas the other narrators (including those who had same-sex experiences as children in the 1960s) did not come out until the 1970s, and in two cases, the early 1980s.

Two of the other narrators, Erin and Teresa, referred to an early feeling of difference that pertained not to their sexuality but to the way that they were treated at school. In Erin’s case, this difference was connected to being Scottish and ‘speaking a different language’:

I literally lost my voice when I emigrated to Australia. Australian school children used to beat me up in the playground and ask me to speak ‘Scottish’ to them, and I never knew what they were talking about 'cause I thought we spoke English in Scotland. But I’d make things up and I’d say ‘Ooohchla, oohchla, ochla och’ and they’d say, ‘What does that mean?’ and I’d say, ‘Good morning, how are you?’! It took me years to find a voice again ...⁴

Like Erin, for Teresa, the feeling of difference was also connected to her being exiled in school because of the way she spoke - in her case it was to happen twice, once when her family moved to England in 1964, and again when they returned to Canberra in 1968. Of the first of these occasions, Teresa recalls:

The very first day school started, I woke up and I had the measles ... So for the first two weeks I missed out on going to school, and the consequence was, when I actually - and this relates to being a lesbian I think - when I actually started school I was already an outsider. Already, all these friendship groups had formed ... On top of that I was Australian in an English school system, and in a fairly middle-


⁴ Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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class area with an Australian accent. And the attitudes then were very much you came from the colonies, and that you would be lesser than the English people.5

When her family returned to Australia, Teresa remembers feeling really excited because she knew she was back where she belonged and not an outsider anymore, but her return to school brought with it a rude shock:

When I went to the school, and I was really excited to be back in Australia because I belonged, but by then I had an English accent (laughing). And so what I found happening was a repeat, but a bit different, of what had happened about being an outsider!6

That in both Erin and Teresa's narratives of the past, these memories of non-sexual difference play a formative role in the later understanding of their sexual selves has an interesting twist in the context of difference as outlined by Plummer. The sense of difference Plummer refers to tends to be directly related to sexuality at the time – or if not sexuality, then the gendered nature of sex roles which assumes a connection between early tomboy behaviour and a later lesbian identity. Susan J. Wolfe's narrative of childhood as included in The Original Coming Out Stories7 typifies this common version of the coming out story where she says 'Yes, like so many of us, I was a “tomboy”: I scorned dolls, had male playmates, owned a baseball glove and basketball'.8 Lesbian feminist theorist, Shane Phelan, argues against equating tomboy behaviour with a later lesbian identity citing her own coming out process as a case in point:

When I first came out, I looked into my past for the indicators of my true sexuality and gloried to find them. Thinking that I was discovering rather than becoming, I traced my history of latent lesbianism: being a tomboy, playing sexual games with pubescent girlfriends, being a feminist, not shaving my body hair ... What [I] saw as signs of lesbianism were signs of nonconformity to sexist standards of femininity ... Being a tomboy is not an indicator of lesbianism except to those who believe that real women do not climb trees.9

If, as Plummer suggests, a feeling of difference is a necessary denominator in coming out stories perhaps what we are witnessing in Erin and Teresa’s narratives here is their desire to interpret their experiences through a lens which is popular in the lesbian (and gay) arena. A lens which allows them to align and validate any early feelings of

5 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994..

6 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994..

7 Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe (eds), The Original Coming Out Stories, The Crossing Press, California, 1989.

8 Susan J. Wolfe, 'Coming Around' in Penelope and Wolfe (eds), The Original Coming Out Stories, p. 195.

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difference in accordance with their later adopted sexual identity. To quote again from Shane Phelan, coming out ‘is a process of fashioning a self – a lesbian self – that did not exist before coming out began’. I suggest here, that these are both instances where the coming out story has helped shape the interpretation of lesbian experience.

It is interesting to note that apart from Emma, the other three narrators who were born in the early 1950s experienced no feelings of difference in their childhood and adolescent years and had no knowledge of lesbianism or homosexuality until they were adults. None of the three recall receiving any messages about homosexuality, good or bad, during childhood or adolescence. Dee, at nineteen and married mother of two, was the youngest of the three when she first heard about lesbianism from a girlfriend in 1972. Pat started gravitating slowly in the direction of lesbianism after the break-up of her marriage when she was in her early twenties. And Leigh, divorced mother of three, first heard that such a thing existed when she went to university as a mature-age student in her late twenties.

There is a marked difference between the remembered experiences of the older narrators, Emma, Dee, Pat and Leigh, and the other four narrators with regard to early messages of, and knowledge about, lesbianism and homosexuality. Kate, Jocelyn, Erin and Teresa, all born in the 1955-61 period, recall knowing, as children and young adolescents, that lesbianism existed and that it was a socially unacceptable thing. Each of them is clear that this knowledge did not come directly from their parents or through religion, but none of them is able to pinpoint exactly where they learnt this message. Teresa, born in 1961 and one of the youngest of the narrators, was the only one to relate, in some detail, her experiences of early sexual exploration with another girl, and interconnectedly, how she came to learn that same-sex exploration was not socially acceptable. For Kate and Erin, the message was conveyed in a more general way; neither recalls a particular experience that directly involved them, it was always more via the potential threat of name-calling or simply because no-one publicly engaged in, or admitted to, same-sex interactions. Jocelyn, on the other hand, was the recipient of the cold shoulder treatment from her peers in primary school after she admitted to having a crush on her best friend. And a few years later, at a different school, she was called a lesbian by two other girls who would not explain to her what a lesbian actually was. Jocelyn’s experiences come across in the interview as charmingly innocent, almost helpful, events in her journey towards understanding and accepting a lesbian sexuality for herself. One imagines though, that both instances

10 Phelan, Getting Specific, p. 53.
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were also painful and much more confusing to an eight or twelve year old than the memory of the thirty four year old re-telling them would suggest.

Whilst unable to pinpoint exactly where they learnt that homosexuality was a less than positive thing, the narrators born post-1955 suggested that the negative attitudes towards lesbianism and homosexuality were probably learned in the school playground via a mixture of explicit and implicit means. According to them, such measures included, but were not limited to, the lack of role models engaging in lesbian/homosexual behaviour and the use of the label ‘lesbian’ (or a derogatory variation of it) as a term of abuse intended to police behaviour in a heterosexual direction.

The narratives on early knowledge of lesbianism included in this section are presented in chronological order, by date of birth. Seven of the eight narrators are included here, and it is hoped that the chosen ordering of their narratives will provide a sense of the gradual change that took place in attitudes towards lesbianism (and homosexuality) throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. Whilst most of the focus here is on Canberra, there are references to other parts of Australia, as well as internationally. Some of Jocelyn’s narratives draw on her experiences in the Philippines and Thailand while Kate’s experiences of adolescence as re-told here are Sydney-based and Dee’s are Newcastle-based.

I have included Leigh’s narrative in this section even though her first or ‘early’ knowledge of lesbianism didn’t transpire until she was in her late twenties because it provides an example of a retrospective reading of her past from a different perspective to the one(s) she had access to at the time. Such consciously retrospective readings of the past, using a lesbian (or feminist) lens, were a common element of all of the narrators’ stories as earlier indicated by the retrospective sense of difference in the coming out stories of Emma, Erin and Teresa. These interpretations feature prominently in this history. Hopefully, collectively they will serve to dispel the argument put forward (and discussed in more length in Chapter One) by Anderson and Jack which posits that material obtained from women in interview situations tends to suffer because ‘what is often missing is the woman’s own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity’.

main agents in their interpretation of the past and present as it pertains in this instance to their individual lesbian identities.

**Emma (b. 1952)**

Emma believes that she was born a lesbian. She first remembers being conscious of her difference when she was about eight although she didn’t have a name, or even a fully formed concept, for what that difference was exactly. She says that while she got on fine with boys, she just really preferred being with girls and that when she was twelve or thirteen, she knew that she was ‘attracted’ to girls and female school teachers. Emma vividly remembers having a crush on her English teacher in the mid 1960s:

> I used to sit up the front of the class and, you know, die of pleasure! I hung on her every word and if she gave me a good mark on my essays, I would just die of pleasure and I’d smell the paper that she’d written it on. And if she criticised my work, I’d be devastated ... I used to sort of think about, you know, kissing her. And I used to think of reasons to have to go up and talk to her about some particular bit of homework. And stand near her, and smelling her, and all that sort of stuff. 12

Emma thinks that she must have confessed her crush to one of her school friends because she does remember that it was all over the school that she had a crush on Mrs B. and was the source of much teasing. Oddly enough, given the time, Emma recalls this teasing was all done in good humour.

Emma’s story has several key points of connection with one told by one of the interviewees in Chilla Bulbeck’s *Living Feminism. The Impact of the Women’s Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women*. Glenda, who was born only three years earlier than Emma in rural Queensland, recalled that her ‘interest in women as sexual objects [surfaced] at a very young age which was probably when [she] was 12’. ‘I was aware of really liking women and being interested in women and preferring them as company’ she says. ‘It probably wasn’t until ... about 16 that I was convinced that I certainly wasn’t heterosexual.’ Although, unlike Emma, Glenda attempted sexual relations with boys during her adolescence, both women vividly recall being aware at a young age that they were attracted to other girls, and both believe that their choices around sexuality were influenced and affected by the lack of approval ascribed to homosexuality in small town Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. ‘It was really viewed as

12 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
a disease and an illness' says Glenda, 'whether of the mind or body they couldn't
determine.'

While she was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Emma didn't have a particularly
good relationship with her mother, from whom she remains ostracised to this day. She
believes that their relationship suffered because her mother suspected that she was a
lesbian. She recalls that her mother was forever calling her 'peculiar' and 'odd' and
would often say things like 'Why can't you be more normal!' Emma says:

I knew that she knew that I was [a lesbian], but she couldn't bring herself to name
it ... she really disliked me intensely and still does. And I'm convinced it's based on
that even though she never named it.14

Emma's early sense of herself as being somehow different led her to seek out books
about homosexuality and lesbianism. In the late-1960s she remembers reading
Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness15 which she says helped her to understand
'what' she was.

I kind of saw myself as a bit that way, a bit of a third sex ... When I read that I thought 'Oh wow, that's me. Now I
know what it's all about.' Not that I wanted to be a man,
but that I just thought that I was of the third sex ... You
know, The Well of Loneliness was the big one for me to this
day. And I've read it over and over again. Even to this day,
I've still got the same copy - it's a bit moth eaten!16

Figure 31 Radclyffe Hall, 1928.

In the early 1970s when the lesbian issue was struggling to make itself heard in
feminist circles throughout Australia, Emma recalls that she was reading American
psychiatric reports in a desperate attempt to better understand her lesbian nature.

13 Glenda as cited in Chilla Bulbeck, Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three
14 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
was banned in Australia in 1936 (some seven years after it was banned in England) but reviews of the
scandalous novel appeared in the Australian press in the early 1930s. One such review titled 'Breaking
the Silence' is included in Monte Punshon's scrapbooks housed at the Australian Lesbian and Gay
Archives (ALGA). For a discussion of this review see Ruth Ford, 'Contested Desires: Narratives of
Passionate Friends, Married Masqueraders and Lesbian Love in Australia, 1918-1945', PhD thesis, La
Trobe University, 2000, pp. 315-16 and 337.
16 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
A little later in the 1970s Emma also remembers reading books like *Loving Someone Gay*\(^{17}\) and *Rubyfruit Jungle*\(^{18}\) (which she hated). Of American psychiatric reports she says:

> I read a lot of it, I think it was early 1970s, when I was particularly struggling with it, you know? Because of being at work and it was so hard. And I’d had some nasty experiences in Sydney ... being harassed and threatened. When that happened a lot, I used to wish I could find a way out of it; how could I go against my nature?\(^{19}\)

![Figure 32 Room set up for aversion therapy.](image)

In American psychiatric reports prior to 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declared homosexuality to be a sexual orientation disturbance rather than a mental disorder\(^{20}\), recommended treatments for homosexuality/lesbianism included: electric shocks to the hypothalamus gland or clitoris, involuntary incarceration into mental institutions, and supervised sexual intercourse with the ‘problem’ woman’s husband. In Australia, in the period inbetween the 1950s and 1970s, lesbian and homosexual tendencies were also considered reason enough for incarceration, and were also treated by similar aversion therapies to those

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19 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
20 The frequently cited decision by the APA to remove homosexuality from its century old place on the mental illness list occurred on 16 December 1973. Less well known is the fact that the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (ANZCP) removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses over two months earlier on 13 October 1973. For a more comprehensive discussion of the events leading up to this decision see Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud. A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 103-4.
PART III. PERSONAL NARRATIVES

administered in America including electric shocks, nausea-inducing drugs, and brain surgery (frontal lobotomies and cingulotracotomies). It is not surprising, in this context, that Emma wanted to 'cure' herself.

Seeking out psychiatric (and any other) literature on homosexuality in the 1970s resulted in Emma trying to understand herself through a number of different theories. The two theories she remembers most vividly trying on for size were: 'seeking out a relationship with a woman because you had a lousy one with your mother'; and 'becoming a lesbian because you were close to your father'. At this time in America a number of theories explaining homosexuality were prevalent. They included:

1. Lesbians are man-haters
2. Women are lesbians because they can't get a man
3. Women become lesbians because they are afraid of childbirth or don't like children
4. All lesbians are really in love with their fathers
5. Women become lesbians because they had a bad experience with men in their early lives
6. Feminists are really lesbians
7. All lesbians are either 'butch' or 'femme'

Emma's recollection of the theories of homosexuality she was 'trying on' in the 1970s would indicate that similar myths about lesbianism were also circulating in mainstream Australia during that time. These same myths paved the way for the shortened version of the lesbian as a 'man-hating, sexually frustrated, ugly woman in need of a good fuck' which emerged soon after the silence surrounding homosexuality was broken and the issue became an area of public debate. It was a stereotype especially aimed at feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. Ultimately though, Emma never really entirely embraced any one of these early theories, nor their later stereotyped


22 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.

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versions, believing rather that she 'was born that way ... [and that] there was absolutely no choice'. 'It was there', she says, 'it was always going to be that way.'

Emma was unaware of the campaign against the medicalisation of homosexuality that surfaced in Sydney in 1972. These early protesters of the treatments being meted out to homosexuals declared 'We're sick of being reasonable ... when the oppressive horrors of aversion therapy, psychosurgery and neo-Freudian bullshit psychotherapy continue to fuck us over'. Emma's life evolved in a parallel universe to that of the gay activists; having no knowledge of such things, she was simply trying to survive as best she could in what she describes as a 'hostile world'.

Dee (b. 1953)

Dee does not remember any messages from her childhood about lesbianism or homosexuality. The only sex-related messages she recalls hearing from her family were to do with abortion and how girls who had them were not to be associated with. The first time Dee consciously remembers hearing about lesbians was when a friend of hers, Gail, invited her to Sydney to meet up with some friends who happened to be lesbians. In her words:

I didn't even think about lesbianism until I was nineteen when a friend asked me to go to Sydney with her and visit these friends ... she said they were 'lesbians', so that got me thinking at the time, you know, what in fact was a lesbian.

Dee remembers that she was sitting in the kitchen of her house in Newcastle when Gail invited her to go to Sydney. It was 1972 and the idea of lesbians was scary yet fascinating to Dee, not yet twenty. She ended up going to Sydney where she met her first lesbians who turned out to be 'just really nice women', but it was another four years before Dee started seriously entertaining the idea that she might have lesbian tendencies herself.

Leigh (b. 1953)

Leigh had never heard of homosexuality or its female equivalent until she was in her late twenties and attending university in the early 1980s. In retrospect, she thinks she

24 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
25 This quote appears in an undated (c. 1973) Sydney Gay Liberation leaflet and is cited in Willett, Living Out Loud, p. 105.
26 Interview with Dee, 18 March, 1994.
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was probably always a bit more keen than was appropriate on her female softball and basketball teachers at school; 'I always thought they were pretty good', she says, 'and I always imagined growing up and being like them.' Once she became a lesbian, Leigh also began wondering about one particular friendship she had at school in the mid-to-late 1960s:

In high school I had one friend who I'd been friends with for six years and I didn't hang around with a group of girls, I just hung around with her ... And [in fourth form] when another girl wanted to be friends with us, that made three of us and to me that seemed like 'three's a crowd' - two was enough for me, so I didn't like that arrangement.27

Leigh is sure that the thought of having to share her friend, Fran, for the final two years of school contributed more than any other one thing to her decision to leave after fourth form, and to enrol instead in secretarial college. She simply did not want to have to share Fran with anyone. In her words:

In lots of ways now I think that was probably my first sort of relationship with a girl because I liked to do everything with her; I just quite liked her and no-one else.28

Even so, says Leigh, she wouldn't actually say that she was 'attracted' to Fran, that didn't happen for Leigh until she did Women's Studies at the Australian National University (ANU) and saw, for the first time, women who she was told were lesbians.

Kate (b. 1955)

Kate believes that she had a conceptual understanding of lesbianism by the time she was fourteen, but she isn't entirely sure that she knew the actual word 'lesbian' back then. She remembers being attracted to one of her friends at the time and says that she had a feeling that this friend, Ann, was going to be a 'lesbian'; sometimes, Kate says, she wondered whether she too could be one, but ultimately she decided that peer approval was more important. Kate recalls quite clearly thinking, 'No, no - I'm going to be normal, just like everyone else', and after that, making a conscious decision to pursue boys and do the expected heterosexual thing. Kate says that by the late 1960s she knew that being a lesbian was not a socially acceptable thing, but thinks that such knowledge probably came more from the fact that no-one did it rather than any heavy moralistic messages. She certainly has no memory of her parents saying anything

27 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
28 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
about it, and she is sure that any sex education she had was solely about how babies were made. In her words:

I can’t identify any particular things that made me think that [lesbianism was socially unacceptable], I just knew ... I mean my worry with it in high school was really much more about the approval of people rather than a moral issue. I don’t think anyone ever told me it was immoral, I think no-one had ever mentioned it ... (laughing)29

Kate does recall one amusing incident that happened in the early 1970s after she had changed from the State system to an alternative hippy school. Kate remembers her Science teacher in the new school as being an older woman who was always incredibly nice to her. At one point, the Science teacher asked Kate if she wanted to earn some extra money sewing a quilt for her. Kate agreed to do it and arranged to go to her house to measure up the bed. She says:

As it turned out, there were two women living there and only one double bed! And I think that was her very subtle way of letting me know she was a lesbian (laughing) ... But I didn’t actually work that out until quite a while later ... so, I happily measured up the bed and thought ‘That’s interesting isn’t it - there’s two of them and one double bed - Oh well ...’ and I measured it up and made the bedspread for her and later on worked it out.30

In retrospect, Kate believes that this teacher had probably worked out that she was going to be a lesbian and was offering a safe and supportive environment for Kate to talk about it if she needed to. At that time however, Kate was not ready to explore the question of her own sexuality.

**Jocelyn (b. 1960)**

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Jocelyn always had a particular girlfriend with whom she did and talked about ‘everything’. She describes herself as having always been a ‘serial monogamist’, beginning with a series of intense childhood friendships and later in life repeating the pattern with sexual relationships. Jocelyn recalls that the first crush she had on another girl was when she was about seven or eight when she was living in the Philippines. At around the same time, one of the other girls at school, accused of having a crush on another girl, had been cruelly taunted and teased about it. Jocelyn didn’t exactly know what a crush was but she knew that it was definitely something to be wary of. When, soon after, she herself was accused of having a crush on her best friend, Mary Gomez, Jocelyn nonetheless

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29 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
30 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
pleaded guilty to the charge; in her mind that seemed the only possible answer because she did think Mary was wonderful. Her honesty about the crush somehow served to silence the girls involved who obviously had no idea how to deal with someone who was game enough to admit to such a heinous crime. But even though she wasn’t teased and taunted, as the other girl had been, Jocelyn unwittingly had brought to an end her intense friendship with Mary who would no longer talk to her.

Some years later in the early 1970s, when Jocelyn was attending school in Thailand, she remembers being called a lesbian for the first time. She was about twelve at the time, and was getting changed to go for a swim with the headmistress’s daughter, Jillian, and another friend Michelle, when Jillian turned to her and said ‘You’re a lesbian’. Jocelyn’s response was to ask ‘What d’you mean? What’s that?’ But neither Jillian nor Michelle would tell her. She says that she is pretty sure she guessed what it meant, but couldn’t quite get her head around the whole concept. She remembers that her thoughts on the subject were somewhat confused:

Ah, well I didn’t think that I wasn’t one because I’d had crushes on girls … I had a feeling that maybe I was what she was saying I was, but I couldn’t quite figure out what it was, she was saying, I was.31

Many years later, Jocelyn remembers being bemused when she heard via the old school grapevine that Jillian actually ended up having lesbian relationships herself.

During her first four years as a boarding student at Canberra Girls Grammar in the mid-1970s, Jocelyn says that although Grammar girls were frequently called lesbians by students from other schools, especially in sporting competitions, she was unaware of any lesbian relationships going on in the school. Jocelyn says that although they were always being taunted with the lesbian word by outsiders, they all ‘thought it was a bit of a joke because we weren’t, none of us, practising lesbians’. When she became a day student in fifth and sixth form, however, Jocelyn did come to notice – as did most of the school – that two girls were having a relationship that began when they were in fourth form and which was still continuing when they left school in sixth form.32 Jocelyn remembers that they were incredibly blatant in displaying their affections for one another:

They used to roll around on the grass outside where all the maths classrooms were and attract the attention of all the classes. Like the younger girls would be learning maths and the whole class would be in uproar over these two girls pashing off. But


32 These two women were rumoured still to be together, almost twenty years later, at the time of the interview in 1994.
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no-one ever stopped them and it was in class time and everything. There was this real thing of – they’re different, they’re unusual, that they were a bit weird ... So they got away with it on those grounds ... Everyone, the girls, the staff, knew what was going on ... A real tolerance in a way, plus they really went out of their way to flaunt it. Kind of weird. They were just cheeky. Maybe the staff thought if they didn’t ignore it, it would get worse.33

It remains a mystery to Jocelyn why, in an otherwise conservative and religious environment, such blatantly lesbian behaviour was tolerated as much as it was by staff and students alike.

Erin (b. 1961)

At high school in Australia in the mid 1970s Erin remembers being in love with several of her female teachers. She says that she had no such feelings for teachers back in Scotland where the education system was much more violent and adults seemed to inhabit a completely different world to children. The crushes Erin had on her teachers in Canberra she kept to herself because on some level she knew that it wasn’t an OK thing. What was a crush? Well, for Erin, a crush meant that you’d go out of your way to gain the attention of the teacher in question, from hanging out near the staff room to doing excellent work for them. In her words:

You’d do everything within your power to walk past them in the playground, or be in their class, or hang out near the staff room – all of that ‘Notice me! Notice me! Notice me!’ behaviour. You’d do really good work for them, try to be a good student, all of that sort of thing.34

Erin remembers on one momentous occasion seeing her fourth form history teacher, whom she had a ‘wicked crush’ on, at the local shops when she was there with her mother:

I saw her one time in the Charnwood shops. And that was it for me! I was with my mum in the Charnwood shops and I’d seen my teacher out of hours, and that was like, ‘Oh my God!’ (laughing) That set me off for about a fortnight ... I used to go up to those shops a bit more often than I had to just in case she came back.35

At the same time as Erin was in the throes of having such crushes, she remembers that when another girl at school admitted publicly to having a crush on the female maths teacher, she was taunted with comments like ‘You’re a dirty lezo’ for a long time. Erin admits, somewhat shamefacedly, that she too dished out abuse to this girl:

34 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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I didn’t think about that until about three years or four years later, when I thought back on it and just cringed ... It wasn’t as if people thought she was a lesbian, no-one assumed that she was, but this was a deviant public statement and it had to be countered immediately by these very conservative school students ... I think that I had joined in as much as anyone and it made me feel so awful years later.36

In retrospect Erin recognises that her behaviour at the time was a combination of internalised homophobia mixed with an understandable desire to survive the conservative and regulatory politics that school playgrounds function and thrive on.

Teresa (b. 1961)

During her childhood, Teresa recalls knowing that being sexual was bad or wrong, but does not remember this message including any information about the sex of those being sexual. The messages she received about sex whilst growing up in the 1960s and early 1970s were learnt largely via omission. In other words, it was through the marked absence of comments about sex that she worked out that sex was a ‘bad’ thing best kept secret.

On two occasions, when she was a teenager, Teresa does however remember homosexuality being discussed publicly. The first incident occurred in 1975 when she was in second form, when her teacher’s presumed homosexuality became the focus of heated discussion by students in the playground. Teresa remembers that she stuck up for her teacher, but she recalls that she defended him in terms of his teaching ability rather than dealing with the issue of his alleged homosexuality. It was only in 1978 when she was in college37 that Teresa witnessed an ongoing and heated debate about homosexuality. The discussion was largely negative towards homosexuality and it was probably here, more than any place, that Teresa learned how deeply ingrained institutional and individual homophobia was. She describes how this awareness came about for her:

When I started Women’s Studies at Hawker College, the year before there was a woman ... who was a lesbian. She had left to take another job, but also was being harassed for being a lesbian at the college ... I knew stuff around lesbianism from that. I found out that she was harassed at school because she was a lesbian – by

36 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.

37 Since the late 1970s, the government-funded education system in the ACT has been different from the rest of Australia in that high school has included only the four years from 7 to 10 (or in the old terminology, first through fourth form). The final two years of schooling are done at College, which is based on a more independent student model with the aim of providing a more suitable bridge between secondary and tertiary levels of education. These two years are not compulsory and many students leave school after Year 10 to take up apprenticeships, attend technical college, or to try to find work.
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staff, not students, by staff – so already by 1978 ... I was aware of that as (pause). It was one thing to be a feminist, but if you were a lesbian – and you got harassed if you were a feminist – but if you were a lesbian, it was more ... [because you were] stepping out of line in a big way, in a scary way.38

Later that same year, Teresa went, with her mother and sister, to the first Women and Labour Conference at Macquarie University in Sydney. It was here, at age seventeen, that she was to find her first positive lesbian role models, and one in particular:

There for the first time I was ... seeing lesbians who were very out about being lesbians, and they weren’t like the lesbians that I’d read about or heard about ... And there was this woman ... VERY publicly a lesbian ... I thought ‘She’s gorgeous’ ... It wasn’t the first time I realised I wanted to be sexual with women ... but it was the first time I thought ... ‘that’s the word to describe me’ ... [and] while I didn’t act on that ... I knew that I would. It was just a matter of time.39

Figures 33 & 34

38 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
Discovering sex: early and first consensual sexual experiences

In this section, I make a distinction between consensual and non-consensual sexual experiences to indicate that incest and rape experiences have not been included here. While incest and rape are sometimes considered to be sexual experiences 40 I am more inclined to categorise them explicitly as the abuse of power. That I haven’t included a section on non-consensual sexual experiences in this thesis should not be taken to mean that none of these women were victims/survivors of incest or rape. This, however, is a sensitive area of study well beyond the realms of this thesis, and the best I can hope to achieve here is to simply acknowledge the existence and probable impact of such abuse. 41

The following narratives are presented in chronological order according to the period they roughly refer to; unlike the preceding section this has no correlation to the date of birth of the narrators. Part of my intention in ordering these narratives by period is to illustrate that changing societal attitudes notwithstanding, the sexual journey towards a lesbian identity, regardless of how long it takes, is unique and specific to each individual narrator. These individual journeys contain similar elements that, perhaps surprisingly, tend not to correlate with changing public attitudes towards lesbianism and homosexuality. Nor do they seem to have been affected in any significant way by the emergence of women’s and gay liberation despite the overlapping time period.

In this section I focus on the consensual childhood, adolescent and early or pivotal adult sexual experiences of the narrators as told by them. The narrators vary in terms of how much detail they include in their discussion of sex. Some mention fucking while others rely more on implicit associations like ‘virgin bride’ to describe their sexual experiences. Only one of the narrators, Theresa, goes into any sort of detail about specific sexual acts and then only to describe her childhood and adolescent experiences. Explicit descriptions of what constituted a lesbian experience are completely absent. Words like cunnilingus, oral sex, tribadism, (vaginal) penetration, and sex toys, were never mentioned. Pat mentions masturbation and Erin talks about stroking, comforting and sleeping with another woman but is clear that that did not constitute having sex. Kate, describing her first sexual experience with a woman says

40 In legal terms, for example, rape and incest are today categorised as ‘sexual assault’.

41 My suggesting that sexual abuse impacts on sexual experience is not intended to imply that I support theories that link lesbianism to negative experiences with men. It is rather meant as a far more general observation that acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of sex and sexuality as they are experienced by each individual.
that she and a friend "fucked and everything." Admittedly it was not my intention to
draw out the narrators on their sexual repertoire and I'm confident that, had I asked, a
number of them would have been happy to talk in more detail about the sorts of
lesbian sex they were having back then. What is interesting to note here, however, is
the probability that the lack of volunteered explicit sexual details by the narrators is
indicative of a wider female and/or lesbian reticence; a trend which may have serious
implications for future historians interested in exploring lesbian, heterosexual or
bisexual desire in the twentieth-century.

This section includes narratives from all eight narrators although some, as mentioned
earlier, are substantially shorter than others. For Emma and Jocelyn their first sexual
experience/s were with another woman although in neither case did this coincide in
them coming out in a public sense. Teresa, on the other hand, experimented sexually
with both boys and girls during her childhood but chose a male partner to have sex
with for the first time although she was positive that she would one day have sex with
a woman. The other five narrators also had their first sexual experience/s with men
and came to lesbianism at various points of their lives after that. The first lesbian
experiences of Pat, Dee, Erin, Kate, Teresa and Leigh are included in the final coming
out section of this chapter rather than in this section where the focus is on early and
first sexual experiences. Emma and Jocelyn's transition from closeted to 'out' lesbians
are also included in the coming out section.

Dee (b. 1953): 1965-1970

Dee remembers having a very female oriented childhood and adolescence. She
remembers many special experiences with her girlfriends, including sleeping together,
cuddling, exploring and practising love bites on one another under the pretext that
that is what happens between boys and girls. But she also always, since 'probably
kindergarten', had a boyfriend because 'it was always a really big thing to have one.'

Raymond Terrace, some fifteen miles outside of Newcastle, was not a particularly
progressive place in the 1960s and 1970s. Dee describes it as 'a bit of a country town at
the time' although she later adds that even today it isn't the sort of place where you
can comfortably be 'out'. In such a context it never crossed Dee's mind that there may
be alternative lifestyles (or sexualities) to the heterosexual one she knew about and
was living. She does not remember any mention of lesbianism, but vividly recalls
being discouraged by her family from associating with the sister of a girl who had had
an abortion.

In 1968, when Dee was fifteen her social life consisted of going to discos, sleeping on
beaches and hanging out with boys in panel vans. She met a boy from nearby
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Newcastle whom she went out with until in 1970 she married him. She was seventeen. In retrospect, says Dee, it was really quite strange that in the space of one year she went from living at home in a very female-centred environment to married life which was quite the opposite, especially following the birth of two sons. In her words:

"It was a weird thing really, when I think about it now. I hadn't thought about it before, but just to go, you know, all in [the space of] one year [from] still being kind of young enough to go out with my girlfriends, and you know, talk about all the things you talk about at school, spend nights with them sleep in the same bed, giggle and everything, to - by the end of the year - being married and sleeping with some boy only in bed ... what an odd thing (laughs softly)."

42 Interview with Dee, 18 March, 1994.

Leigh (b. 1953): 1965-1979

Leigh did not experiment sexually with either boys or girls whilst she was growing up. She had a boyfriend from the age of twelve whom, she says, she kissed and fooled around with a bit from when she was fourteen or so. But even so, she was still technically a virgin when she married him, aged seventeen, in 1970. Sex to Leigh, was something a woman did after she was married and only then because she was supposed to.

"I had no great burning desire to have sex with him. In fact I was still a virgin on the night I got married. I thought, 'Oh well, now I have to do it because I'm married and that's what you do.' So I did that. I wasn't terribly excited about the whole thought of that but that's what you did. I had definitely heard that most women didn't think sex was all that wonderful anyway, so I wasn't disappointed as I really didn't have any great expectations about it anyway."

43 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.

During the 1970s it never crossed Leigh's mind to question, let alone alter, the direction her life was taking. In 1979, however, eight years into her marriage, Leigh had an affair with a neighbour's husband. That experience combined with fact that she had to get drunk in order to endure having sex with her husband provided her with the impetus to leave the marriage. She describes what was going on for her at the time as follows:

"I was always waiting to be happy. But by the time I had my third child, I really didn't think this was the road to happiness. I thought 'Well, I've done all the right things so far: I've gotten married, I've got a house and all the things you need in it, I've got a car, I've got children ... It just doesn't seem quite right."

44 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
Leigh’s taste for sex may have been whetted by the affair she had with her neighbour, but she says that it was only after leaving her marriage, as she headed into her late twenties, that she began to explore sex as something that could be enjoyable for both parties.

**Teresa (b. 1961): 1968-1979**

When she was growing up, Teresa lived in a quiet and friendly neighbourhood in which she remembers there being a lot of sexual play:

> In the street where I lived ... there were lots of people under ten and we used to play together, lots of sexual play - you know, lots of going and taking clothes off in garages that had just been built ... 45

Teresa remembers several incidents in great detail. On one occasion when she was seven or eight, she recalls inviting a girl from school home knowing that she wanted to be sexual with her and knowing somehow that such a desire was wrong. Not because it was with a girl as such, but because sex itself was a bad thing. In Teresa’s words:

> There was a girl at school who I invited to my house ... I knew that I wanted to be sexual with her. I didn’t particularly like her as a person, I didn’t want to be her friend or anything like that. I don’t know why I picked her. It wasn’t like she was fabulously attractive to me. Maybe I just decided that I’d get away with it with her ... I also knew I didn’t want to get caught ... I think I knew that from heterosexual playing, with boys, doing that sort of stuff ... Anyway, so I put a chair up against the door handle so that it would be very hard to open the door ... And I persuaded her to take her clothes off and I had my clothes off. Don’t ask me how I did it! ... we then proceeded to rub each other’s bottoms - it was such an erotic experience (laughing). That’s all we did. One of us would lie on their tummy and the other one would hop on top and rub her bum and then vice versa, we’d swap ... And then we put our clothes on, and that was it. I never really had any contact with her after that. It was not even a one ‘night’ stand (laughing). 46

A couple of years later, when she was about ten, Teresa recalls starting to flirt with two boys at school, particularly one called Brett. She continued playing around with girls, however, and remembers going to an all girls party where she started role-playing with another girl what she would do if the girl was Brett, going so far as to get on top of her and kiss her. The following day at school everyone knew what she had done at the party and it became clear to her that even though it was disguised as a role-play, such behaviour was inappropriate between girls. Soon thereafter, Teresa says, she began going steady with Brett in an attempt to ‘legitimise herself’.


46 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
In the early 1970s, when she was about eleven or twelve, Teresa recalls being traumatised by an event that happened at the local swimming pool. She remembers sitting on the cement near the pool with a girlfriend. They were in full view of everyone but because they had their towels held up over their heads they must have thought they were invisible. She recalls that they were looking at each others breasts and maybe touching them, when a boy came along, and ripped off the towels, calling them 'lezzies'. It was, she thinks, perhaps the first time she had heard the word although somehow she knew what it meant and was completely humiliated and devastated by the experience.

Teresa finds it interesting that once she began flirting with boys in the way that you were expected to, she also ceased to experiment sexually with either sex. She has no recollection of ever doing anything remotely sexual with Brett. Between the ages of ten and sixteen, she says, she didn’t so much as kiss anyone, let alone do anything else. In 1977, at the age of sixteen, Teresa started dating boys more actively but always stopping short of having intercourse. Over the next few years, she also found herself introduced to a sort of lesbianism she didn’t know existed, that being a ‘non-threatening, non-butch, feminist-oriented sort of lesbianism’. But whilst she played around the edges of the social and political environment where such lesbians could be found, at the point when ‘genital contact’ seemed to be the next logical step, she made a conscious decision that her first sexual partner would be a man, not a woman.

**Emma (b. 1952): 1970-1972**

Emma had her first sexual experience in 1970 when she was eighteen. She met her first sexual partner, Sara, playing hockey. Even though Emma was only the second woman Sara had ever slept with, she was nonetheless the sexually ‘experienced one’, says Emma. Emma remembers being totally freaked out about finally being able to express her sexuality. She recalls being incredibly nervous but desperately wanting it to happen as well. Emma describes the experience as having a double-edge to it; on the one hand it felt so right but, on the other,

It was completely a natural thing for me to do, but I had the other side of it - that was a fear of, now I’m going to be discriminated against all my life. There was something, just wishing I could unchoose, or like, go against the biology, because it felt very biological for me. It was really amazing actually because it was kind of a double-edged thing, because I mean I was totally freaked out to be actually expressing this sexuality at last, and you know the fear of discovery by someone in the hotel or ‘Oh my god, now I’m doomed to a life of persecution ... and of course there’s the other side of it where it was absolutely wonderful and felt right ... It was
completely a natural thing for me to do, but I had the other side of it – that was fear of ‘now I’m going to be discriminated against all my life’.  

**Pat (b. 1952): 1971-1975**

Pat does not recall having any attraction towards girls or women until she was in her early twenties. Prior to her marriage in 1971 at age nineteen, she says she had no experience of sex whatsoever. The marriage did not last long, breaking up in 1974. Pat recalls having her first crush on a woman not long after that but admits that she was very confused by her feelings: ‘I wasn’t really sure how to deal with it’, she says, ‘I don’t think I thought of myself as possibly a lesbian.’ After going overseas for a year, Pat returned to Canberra sick of being on her own and determined to get involved in an intimate relationship. She knew that she had two options: to throw herself into relationships with men or to explore her increasing attraction to women. For a while she threw herself into a series of one night stands with men, in the hope, she now believes, that the ‘right man would come along’ and make her forget her intense feelings for women.

In the mid-1970s the direction of Pat’s sexual interest shifted permanently when she began playing basketball and discovered, to her amazement, two women in the social competition who seemed to be in a relationship. One evening after the game, when everyone was up in the bar, these two women began bickering with each other in a way that convinced Pat that they were lovers. It was the first time, she says, that she had ‘knowingly come across lesbians’. Soon thereafter, Pat decided that she was going to go to bed with one of them. In her words:

> My thought at the time – and obviously my inclinations had got quite strong by then – … I remember thinking [that] because they had broken up … I was going to get off with one of them and find out what was happening with me. (Pause) And I did! (laughing)

**Kate (b. 1955): 1973-1974**

In 1973 Kate came to Canberra to start university. Towards the end of that year she became sexually involved with a boy called David whom she moved in with the following year. It was during that year that she once again became interested in lesbianism. Her interest was especially piqued when two lesbians from Melbourne

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47 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
48 Interview with Pat, 5 March, 1994.
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were billeted for a feminist conference at their house. Kate remembers wondering whether the fact that she thought they were lovely meant that she was a lesbian. It was around that time, Kate says, that she slept with a friend ‘just to see what it was like’:

A friend and I spent the night together and fucked and everything – we continued to be friends, but it wasn’t a lover’s relationship that went on. And that’s when I sort of thought that I’d like to be a lesbian.49

The following year, just entering her twenties, Kate decided once and for all that she was a lesbian, and soon after breaking up with David, she began her first serious relationship with a woman which was to last over two years.

Erin (b. 1961): 1974-1978

In high school Erin says that she was considered something of an expert on the issue of sex. She isn’t entirely sure why, except that she was one of the few in her year to be allowed to watch the risque and very popular Australian television series ‘No. 96’.50 She remembers very clearly an occasion when she was in second form when she was asked what oral sex was, and she replied without so much as a pause, ‘That’s when you talk about it a lot.’

Erin describes herself as being ‘one for having secret crushes from afar’ especially when it came to female teachers during her high school years. But in intimate physical terms she never acted on such feelings. She had few close girlfriends, because she says, she was incapable of forming friendships with girls who competed with one another for boys attention:

I couldn’t cope with that focus of always relating through men and I recognised that distinction very early on, of women who wanted to be friends with other women because they valued women’s company and women’s friendship, not

49 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.

50 ‘No. 96’ was the first Australian television series to have, as a main (and continuing) character, a gay man. One of the other main characters, the sexy Abigail, was also much talked about, contributing to the program’s sexually explicit reputation. Throughout the 1970s ‘No. 96’ was, as Graham Willett suggests, ‘one of the most watched programs of its time … [and one that] brought issues into Australian lounge rooms that had hitherto been confined largely to Truth or, more recently, to the theatre-going and literature-buying publics’. Willett, Living Out Loud, p. 55. The other very popular Australian television show that brought lesbians into suburban lounge rooms in Australia, Britain and America, was ‘Prisoner’. Interestingly, in America, women’s organisations and gay groups protested the screening of the ‘Prisoner’ series because of the ‘portrayal of the character Frankie Doyle, as a psychotic lesbian’. Melbourne Herald, 16 August, 1979. In Australia, whilst some feminists were similarly outraged about the portrayal of Frankie as a ‘violent and filthy dyke’ there were never any organised protests and in fact the series had a strong lesbian following. ‘Letter to the Editor’, Lesbian Newsletter, No. 16, April, 1979, p. 2. In London, ‘Prisoner’ had a huge following and in the 1980s ran for some time as a successful West End stage production with members from the original cast.
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because it was a way of showing off to men, or a support network they needed aside from the men ...\textsuperscript{51}

In many ways, Erin preferred the company of males. She had many 'good mates' despite never being interested in having an actual relationship with one of them. As she was interested in sex and wanted to know what fucking was all about, this made things a little complicated. Unwilling to go through the boyfriend ritual and all the compromises that entailed, she concocted and enacted a 'wicked' plan. One of the few girls she was friends with at the time was a Catholic who intended to be a virgin bride. She however, had a boyfriend, Michael, who also happened to have been a mate of Erin's throughout high school. Erin approached Michael with her plan and, as he was also interested in sex but wanted to maintain his relationship with Terese, they decided to embark on a totally secret sexual relationship:

Michael was champing at the bit to bloody have sex as well. I mean, he really wanted to learn about fucking, and, Michael and I, we fucked. We fucked all throughout fifth and sixth form. His girlfriend never found out anything about it. Even to this day I assume she doesn't know.\textsuperscript{52}

It was an arrangement that suited them both for their own reasons, says Erin: 'We were using each other to find out about sex but we were really good mates as well.' As to what the actual sex was like, however, Erin recalls thinking, 'Is that all there is? Is that it? Is that what they do? You're supposed to get off on that?' Erin says that at the time she could never quite believe that that was really it. Nonetheless she continued to have sex with men because it didn't cross her mind at that point to do anything else. It was a few years later, when she slept with a woman for the first time, that Erin finally discovered what she'd really been looking for.

\textit{Jocelyn (b. 1960): 1976-1979}

Jocelyn recalls having a long history of crushes on girls throughout her childhood but she doesn't remember them being sexual as such. It wasn't until the mid 1970s when she was in fourth form that she remembers her crushes taking on a sexual element - initially only in her head. The first sexual crush she remembers was huge but also completely unattainable. She described the object of her desire as being:

\textsuperscript{51} Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.

\textsuperscript{52} Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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The epitome of the blonde surfie chick ... she used to spend her entire weekend and all her holidays surfing down the coast with her boyfriend and she was completely inaccessible as well.\textsuperscript{53}

Jocelyn vividly recalls just how much she wanted to be with this girl physically. She wanted to spend all her time with her, wanted to kiss her and 'do all those kinds of things' but she also knew that she would never ever 'in a million pink fits have acted on it'. It was a safe kind of lust, she says, 'a sexual thing from a great distance'.

Jocelyn's next crush, some months later, was a little less distant and safe. A girl had transferred from a public school to become a boarder at Canberra Girls Grammar School and Jocelyn thought she was just gorgeous. Towards the end of first term a bunch of them were having a midnight feast, which entailed consuming copious amounts of alcohol, soft drugs and lollies. The new girl, Penelope, was quite stoned, and Jocelyn herself was quite drunk, but somehow she picked up on the fact that her crush was reciprocated. She says that they were both very shy but that it was very exciting as far as having a 'lesbian adolescence' goes.\textsuperscript{54} They ended up in Penelope's dormitory which she shared with three other girls. Jocelyn remembers that Billy Joel's 'Piano Man' was playing on the radio, and she was sitting on the floor next to Penelope's bed when Penelope suggested that she get onto the bed. Jocelyn, wearing her purple wool dressing gown and feeling incredibly excited, complied. In her words:

\textit{It was, oh my god, it was so exciting! I was frozen solid and she said, 'Do you want to get under the covers?' and I said 'Oh no, I'm fine out here!' whereas in my head I was thinking 'Oh my god, I would give anything to crawl under those covers with you'. But I just couldn't, 'cause I was kind of frozen by shyness I suppose at that point.}\textsuperscript{55}

Meanwhile, around them, the other girls were not oblivious to what was almost going on between Penelope and Jocelyn, and they teased them unmercifully. A combination of shyness, peer group pressure and a certain amount of apprehension about the

\textsuperscript{53} Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.

\textsuperscript{54} The term 'lesbian adolescence' is used here to describe the period of dating and sexual exploration typical to 'normal' adolescents during their school years but usually absent from lesbian experiences because of the unacceptability of lesbianism as a 'normal' sexual option for teenagers to explore. Prefacing the term 'adolescence' with 'lesbian' is a shorthand way to draw attention to this point. Unlike 'normal' adolescence, and because women can become lesbians at any point of their lives, 'lesbian adolescence' is not restricted by age. It is perhaps better understood as a time early on in the coming out process when sexual exploration and experimentation with other women is rampant and without long-term commitment – others, of course, may prefer to refer to such behaviour as promiscuous, and others yet, as healthily non-monogamous! Because the notion of lesbian adolescence is one that Jocelyn and myself (and other lesbians) share an understanding of, when she referred to it in the interview I understood her meaning without having to ask for further clarification. It is this shared meaning I have elaborated on above.

\textsuperscript{55} Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.
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feelings they had for one another, led to nothing really happening between them, and
the following week Jocelyn left the boarding house to become a day student. The
following term Jocelyn visited the boarding house and ran into Penelope again. This
time Penelope made several explicit overtures towards her but Jocelyn was too scared
to respond. Looking back she is regretful of the lost opportunity but says that it was
probably for the best at the time.

In 1978 when Jocelyn was seventeen and still at school she had sex for the first time.
Once again, a girl had transferred from a State school, and Jocelyn had found herself
attracted to her. Her name was Rachel and as it turned out, she was a friend of
Penelope’s. Jocelyn says that she and Rachel had a strange sort of flirting relationship
that didn’t seem as though it was destined to go any further – until about three days
before Jocelyn’s eighteenth birthday. Jocelyn’s parents were out of town and she pretty
well had the house to herself so she invited Rachel to stay. As she recalls:

We were just kind of there, and we were lying on the floor just listening to music,
and then we started to (pause). We kissed, and she said to me, ‘Oh! Do you do this
kind of thing all the time?’ and I was like, ‘Oh my God!’ and I could hardly talk
because my voice was so shaky, but I said ‘No, I didn’t do this sort of thing all the
time’ ... Anyway, we ended up going to bed and all I can remember is that the first
night we both wore our flannel nighties all night long (laughing) in bed together. It
was very cute.56

Jocelyn and Rachel ended up having a secret relationship until the end of sixth form.
They both had different groups of friends and although there was some overlapping
they really didn’t mix together whilst they were at school. Outside of school was
another matter, and they spent a lot of time together, but Rachel was adamant that
their affair be kept a secret. Jocelyn says that at the time she simply accepted that that
was the way it was, although she thinks if Rachel had wanted to tell people she would
have been agreeable to that as well.

When Rachel ended the relationship in 1979 Jocelyn was completely devastated,
compounded by the fact that she couldn’t talk to anyone about it. Emotionally
distraught, she went off and had a fling with a boy but ended it after a couple of weeks
because she simply had no feelings for men. She describes this, her first in a short
series of heterosexual experiences, as being very dull:

... physically [it was] nothing and I thought, ‘How do you get excited about men in
that same way?’ With women I don’t even think about it, it’s just sort of this gut

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thing and it just happens. Whereas with men it was like I didn’t really feel anything. 57

Jocelyn still sometimes runs into Rachel, who has since married and had children, but they have never spoken about what happened between them. On this matter she says:

I’m not sure where you would begin to talk about it … I have a feeling that she would never have told anyone – this was like, an affair that lasted a year and was intense … Mind you, I’ve told all the old friends at school, some of them couldn’t believe it, they hadn’t guessed 58

Coming out stories

The period between the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s can be seen as a time, when coming out as a lesbian in the English-speaking west was perhaps easier than at any other time in history. This was due in part to the existence and visibility of lesbian and gay communities but was also, in no small way, due to the unprecedented proliferation of published lesbian and gay literature. This literature was, for the most part, contemporary and pertained to America, but despite its narrow geographical focus, it was invaluable in providing a sense of global community to those who read it.

In Australia, where very little gay and lesbian literature was published prior to the 1990s, this literature was eagerly devoured. 59 In 1983, in the forward to one of Australia’s first gay and lesbian anthologies, Dennis Altman noted the lack of Australian-specific gay and lesbian literature and the Australian tendency to rely on American literature:

In other western countries, above all the United States, the growth of such a sense of community has meant a corresponding growth of self-identified gay literature. The gay sections of those few of our bookstores that include such categories will probably comprise 80% of works imported from the United States; and Australian homosexuals, women and men, look to writers like Rita Mae Brown, Andrew Holleran, Jane Rule and Edmund White to articulate our pain and wonder at discovering the complex set of meanings in being gay. 60

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59 The first Australian novel to have a lesbian as the central (if slightly tormented) character was published in 1975. See Elizabeth Riley, All That False Instruction, Sirius, Melbourne, 1975. Unlike America and Britain, gay and lesbian fiction remained a small publishing venture until well into the 1980s and 1990s in Australia when the pioneering efforts of determined lesbian and gay writers paid off. They included writers like: Tony Ayres, Kerry Bashford, Robert Dessaix, Gary Dunne, Mary Fallon, Susan Hawthorne, Michael Herrman, Helen Hodgman, Claire McNab, Finola Moorhead, Jenny Pausacker and Gina Schien.
60 Dennis Altman, ‘Foreword’ in Margaret Bradstock, Gary Dunne, Dave Sargent and Louise Wakeling (eds), Edge City on Two Different Plans: A Collection of Lesbian and Gay Writing from Australia, Inversions,
Almost a decade later, Neil Miller similarly observed that ‘when Australian gays and lesbians talked about books, the authors they mentioned were invariably North American or British’. 61 The impact of feminism played a significant role in the explosion of specifically lesbian literature in America in the 1980s, and to a lesser degree in Britain. In particular, the establishment of women’s presses and feminist and lesbian publishing houses62 provided the foundations for what proved to be a lucrative publishing market and a new genre of literature.63 This market remains largely untapped in Australia today where there are still no lesbian presses and only two feminist presses.64

The coming out story emerged as an explicitly publishable genre in America in the 1980s. 65 The numerous anthologies published throughout the 1970s which contained primary documents about both gay and women’s liberation, paved the way for coming out literature. These anthologies, as well as specialist collections of coming out stories, were devoured by thousands of lesbians and gays throughout the west. Coming out stories resonated with many readers’ own experiences, helping them to realise that they were not alone and that others had been through similar experiences. The publication of coming out stories provided a sense of commonality and community, as well as helping to bridge the distance between past and present. It


62 Specifically lesbian publishers in America include New Victoria, Naiad, Alyson, Banned, Crossing, Spinsters Ink, Firebrand and Seal. The London-based Onlywomen Press also played an important role in allowing lesbian voices to be heard.

63 Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s the new lesbian genre was created and maintained by authors such as: Rita Mae Brown, Lisa Alther, Mary Wings, Katherine V. Forrest, Sandra Scoppeltone, Barbara Wilson, Sarah Dreher, Sarah Schulman, Nisa Donnelly, Ellen Galford, Ruthann Robson, Jewelle Gomez, and Dorothy Allison. Whilst most of these lesbian writers were from America, a handful of others also made names for themselves and became part of the American canon, including Jeannette Winterson, Anna Livia, Claire McNab and Ann Cameron. For a more comprehensive treatment of lesbian fiction during this period see Bonnie Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969-1989, Beacon, Boston, 1990.

64 The Sybylla Feminist Press was initially established as a printing cooperative in 1976 but since 1982 has run a small publishing program producing feminist and left titles; and the Spinifex Press is an independent feminist press which specialises in innovative fiction and non-fiction by Australian and international authors.

magnified a process which had previously only been whispered about between lovers and encouraged a more public oral tradition of coherent coming out monologues.

All of the narrators except Pat admitted to reading some gay, lesbian and/or feminist literature in the process of coming out: Emma identified strongly with Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, but hated Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*; Kate came into contact with radical, socialist, and lesbian feminist literature at various conferences and demonstrations; Teresa was introduced to radical feminist ideas through her Women's Studies class in secondary college and also remembers the Duffy Street dykes providing her with an endless library of current feminist literature; Jocelyn recalls reading lots of lesbian and feminist books when she was in London prior to coming out as well as later in Women's Studies; and Leigh, Erin and Dee recall being introduced to a wide range of feminist and lesbian texts and theories in Women's Studies courses at the ANU where Dee's lesbian identity was particularly influenced by Adrienne Rich's ideas about compulsory heterosexuality.

None of the narrators, however, specifically cited coming out stories themselves as having played an important role in their own coming out process. For some of the narrators the appearance of coming out literature came too late whilst for others it may not have been readily available in Australia. And yet, in 1994, all of the narrators told their stories in a coherent and chronological manner that mirrored the structure of the coming out story. Their stories were internally consistent monologues that were told with humour, passion, emotion and integrity. Each of the narrators provided a coherent personal context for her experiences and furthermore, quite frequently chose to situate those experiences in a sexualised social and political context. Such narratives according to feminist Kristina Minister, and as discussed in Chapter One, are 'typical of men'. 66 Although Minister asserts that women do not tell their lives in a such a way, her findings contradict my own, for these were exactly the kinds of stories the eight women told. These were narratives polished and savoured through repetition. The narratives of the eight women challenge Minister's 'feminist' framework in other ways. The narrators' stories, despite being 'rehearsed', tend not to be static performance pieces. Rather than conforming to the unchanging and polished format that Minister describes and rejects as masculine, the oral narratives told by the eight women in 1994 were polished versions of their past experiences that they agreed would probably alter if the interview was repeated a few weeks, or months, later.

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For several of the narrators sharing their experiences with an intimate other proved to be a crucial means of gaining further understanding about their own experiences as they came to identify as lesbians. I suggest that this process is a widespread phenomenon in the west, and that it, in combination with the emergence of the coming out story as a published genre, has been responsible for the post 1980s emergence of a public oral tradition of coming out stories in gay and lesbian communities. This section includes narratives of a specific moment of coming out in the each of the narrator’s stories; the moment when they accepted to themselves that they were ‘lesbian’.

Erin

In the early part of 1980 Erin was living at Toad Hall and studying at the ANU. Her room was next door to a woman, Toni, who was unlike anyone she’d ever met before. She had a pierced nose and had travelled widely. It was a strange and confusing few months says Erin, and she was often depressed without knowing why. Her parents had, by this time, moved from Canberra to Adaminaby, and Erin sometimes used to visit them on weekends. One weekend in the midst of these confusing months she went home, got there, and immediately got into bed where she just cried and cried. Her mother eventually asked her what was wrong and when Erin told her about this strangely intriguing woman, she slowly leant forward in her chair and said: ‘You’re in love with her ... It’s just a stage you’re going through, and it will all pass, but you’re in love with her’. Erin was completely taken aback by her mother’s evaluation of the situation. Such a thing simply hadn’t occurred to her:

Those words! I couldn’t speak them to myself. You know how sometimes when you’re going through things, and things just don’t occur to you? It’s right in front of your nose, it’s bloody obvious, it’s staring you in the face, but you can’t see it. You’re blind to the most obvious fact! I was blind to the fact that I had actually fallen in love with this woman, and my mum pointed it out to me. And that’s how I came out to my parents. But she was wrong – it wasn’t a stage!67

Alongside the stories of many lesbians, significant numbers of whom never come out to their parents, this experience as retold by Erin in the context of her own sexual journey makes a refreshing change. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, in the coming out stories told by lesbians in America, it is not uncommon for mothers or close friends to pick up and comment on their suspicions of lesbianism prior to an individual herself recognising or acknowledging it. Two of the contributors to The Original Coming Out

67 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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Stories, for example, remember being given The Well of Loneliness by their mothers during their teenage years. For Elaine Mikels this was because, at age fourteen, she had developed a serious crush on another girl at school. And similarly, Jay Reed remembers the conversation instigated by her mother about her unusually close friendship with Maggie:

One day my mother drew me aside for a talk. I could tell she had something on her mind; the nervous solemnity of her manner made me feel instantly apprehensive and uncomfortable ... this particular day she gave me a novel to read, The Well of Loneliness. She said that since Maggie and I spent so much time together, she thought it important to make me aware of certain things.

Regardless of what the intention was behind the passing on of such information to their daughters, what is interesting here is the ability of others to identify '(homo)sexual difference' in those close to them, prior to them acknowledging it themselves. In Erin's case this is especially remarkable given that she had a history of same-sex crushes during high school. That Erin apparently needed someone else to name her lesbian feelings before being able to see them herself is a pattern Karin Abbey recognises in her own experiences as included in Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian and Gay Experiences 1930-1990:

At the end of the summer before my sophomore year at Vassar, I fell in love. Not that I recognised it as such - the idea that I could fall in love with a woman had not occurred to me ... She went to a college near my home, three hours from Vassar ... Any excuse to be where I could see her was good enough ... On weekends when there was no possible excuse for going home she came to see me at Vassar ... One Sunday night ... I watched her board a bus for New York City. I felt so desolate at her leaving that I walked back to campus in a fog. I walked straight to the room of a friend renowned for her understanding ear and poured out my feelings. Sitting beside me on the bed, she said, rather matter-of-factly, 'Sounds to me like you're in love.' She'd put into words what I couldn't, or wouldn't, and it was as if the naming were permission-giving.

In the months that followed the revelatory conversation with her mother, Erin and Toni became closer. Although both of them were still sexually active with men, their relationship went further than any other female relationship Erin had had to this point. In her words:

We started to have this strange sort of physical thing. And we also had this closeness that was really very special. And then we started with more physical

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68 Elana/Elaine Mikels, 'Confessions of a Country Dyke' in Penelope and Wolfe (eds), The Original Coming Out Stories, p. 25.

69 Jay Reed, 'Becoming Borderline' in Penelope and Wolfe (eds), The Original Coming Out Stories, p. 35.

stuff, like occasionally we'd share a bed. But it was like neither of us knew how to make the first move, or quite what to do ...\textsuperscript{71}

As Erin describes it, whilst she and Toni did 'a lot of comforting, a lot of stroking, a lot of sleeping together', Toni was not the first woman she had sex with, although later they did have a physical relationship. At that early stage, however, they did kiss, and it was at that moment, when she was almost twenty years old, that Erin realised that she was a lesbian, and that she would never sleep with men again. It was around this time that Erin got involved, like Kate before her, in student politics, and also did a radio course at the campus-based community radio station 2XX where she says 'there were just lesbians everywhere – “out” and “politically active”.'\textsuperscript{72}

The first time Erin had sex with a woman it came as a complete surprise to her. It was 1981 and she had arranged to move in temporarily with an acquaintance, Susan because Susan's partner was going away for a few months. Erin had to share Susan's bedroom the first night she moved in as her room wasn't ready yet. On the second night Susan said to Erin 'Look, we might as well fuck'. Erin remembers being mildly freaked out at the suggestion, more by its suddenness than anything, but says that her hesitation was in fact interpreted by Susan as her battling with her desire to be faithful to Toni. Susan, like many others, assumed that she and Toni were on together, which was not actually the case at all. Erin didn't however correct Susan and suspects that she still has no idea that that was the case and that this was in fact Erin's first time with a woman. The occasion was a revelatory one for Erin, who clearly remembers thinking something along the lines of: 'This is it! This is real and right. This is the thing I've been waiting for all my life. I've found it now.'

It was a revelatory event for more than this reason however, as it marked Erin's entry into a lesbian culture she had no experience of. As she describes the experience:

This was a person who I’d liked and admired a great deal but I’d never thought particularly sexually about. And the sex turned out to be pretty damn good. And for the entire two months her lover was away we were having sex and it was getting pretty intense by this time. Like I never actually moved out of that bed and into the other room. But as soon as her lover came back she went, 'Alright see you, bye!' And I was just like, devastated. It was my first [experience of] 'Oh so this is how lesbians organise their relationships and deal with each other' ... So that was it.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.

\textsuperscript{72} Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.

\textsuperscript{73} Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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It was not an auspicious beginning to lesbian life, but was not enough to deter Erin. Soon thereafter she was to meet Paula, a woman with whom she would eventually enter into a long-term non-monogamous relationship with. The pair would unintentionally become role models, variously admired and feared, for a significant number of women exploring their sexuality at the ANU in the 1980s.

Jocelyn

Jocelyn recognised the yet to be fully accepted lesbian aspect of herself in the example set by Erin and Paula at the ANU. Interestingly, unlike Erin, Jocelyn had been sexually active with women before men, but had never labelled it as lesbianism. More precisely, her first intimate relationship in the late 1970s was with a girl at school, a relationship which continued throughout Year 12 until Rachel ended it. Nonetheless, when in the early 1980s, during her second year at the ANU, Jocelyn saw ‘out’ lesbians for the first time she was completely terrified by them. In her words:

I remember Erin and Paula were like the two ‘out there’ dykes on campus, and being kind of terrified of getting too close to them – sitting at a table with them or something because they might recognise me as a dyke. I might sort of stand out ... I thought I had it written all over me, and it was all just terribly embarrassing.74

Soon thereafter Jocelyn suspended her studies to travel overseas with her younger sister. They stayed with a cousin in England who, as it happened, was a dyke, and were introduced to lots of feminist and lesbian literature. During this period Jocelyn started coming out to all her heterosexual friends and to anyone who would listen. None of them were particularly surprised saying that they’d known all along. She says of her coming out period:

I came out when I was nowhere near a relationship and I was mixing in completely heterosexual circles. And young men kept asking me out, and I’d been out with this one, and I just thought ‘I can’t handle this any more, I just have to tell everybody so they just leave me alone – I have to tell all these men that I’m a dyke and then they just won’t pester me anymore’. And it worked really well!75

Upon her return to Australia in 1984 Jocelyn got involved with community radio 2XX and found herself in the midst of a lesbian (feminist) community. Soon thereafter Jocelyn started mixing primarily with lesbians and actually being part of ‘the dyke scene in Canberra’. Jocelyn describes her decision to immerse herself in the lesbian

74 Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.
75 Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.
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scene in Canberra: ‘I was just sort of ready, once you’ve come out to everybody, read about it a lot, there just isn’t much else you can do but to get out there and live it.’

*Pat*

Pat’s first sexual experience with a woman quickly turned into a dysfunctional relationship from which she found it difficult to extricate herself. She had met Kim playing basketball in the mid-1970s and had initially gone to bed with her to see ‘what was going on with her’ in terms of the escalating feelings she was having for women. The sexual experience changed Pat forever. Even though for the next eighteen months or so she called herself bisexual, she knew in her heart, that she was a lesbian and that there was no ‘going back to men’. In sexual terms, Pat recalls her first experience with another woman felt totally natural and right which at the time surprised her as she had no real knowledge of the female body and had never even masturbated.

Overall, however, Pat’s first lesbian relationship proved to be a disaster. Her lover, Kim, came from a very abusive family, and according to Pat, the dysfunctional behaviour patterns associated with her background quickly established themselves in their relationship, culminating some time later with Kim telling Pat that she intended to kill them both so that they could go to heaven together. Eventually Pat convinced Kim to commit herself to a psychiatric ward in one of the local hospitals, but this did not free her from the relationship as she was unable to sever the emotional connection she had with Kim, her first female lover. Pat eventually came to understand the extent of the destructive nature of their relationship when she realised that she too had fallen into a deep depression and was starting to consider suicide as the way out of the situation she found herself in. This was enough of a shock to force Pat into ending the relationship with Kim, and beginning the long struggle back to solid ground herself. This was made even harder upon Kim’s release from hospital when she returned to the basketball crowd and told them that Pat had been physically abusive towards her. In the time that Pat and Kim had been together, the crowd had become more and more lesbian-oriented as increasing numbers of women came out. That it was Pat’s first taste of lesbian community made it even harder when, upon hearing Kim’s stories, the basketball crowd dropped her ‘like a hot potato’. Although she had officially come out, Pat had never felt so alone and isolated in her whole life.

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76 Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.


**Emma**

Emma's first sexual experience with a woman inspired in her deep feelings of both relief and despair; on the one hand, it felt completely natural to be expressing her sexuality but on the other, it meant being doomed to a life of persecution. In spite of the complexities inherent in continuing to have sexual relationships with other women, such liaisons provided Emma for the first time with somewhere supportive to speak about her own experiences and to hear about another woman's. For despite playing hockey with other lesbians in the weekend competition and socialising with them after the games, the topic of lesbianism remained unspoken. It was only in the context of intimate relationships that this silence could be broken. Emma remembers her first sexual partner talking about how she too had hoped that she would be able to overcome her biology to be heterosexual, and how neither of them felt capable of fighting against the strong desire to be together. In Emma's words:

> She talked about how she'd hoped that she could go against her biology and try to be with a boy, but you know, the overpowering need to be with me had gotten her again. We felt as though we were falling victim to our desires, you know? Like it was sort of this thing working so strongly on us that we couldn't resist it.⁷⁷

Even once she had accepted that she was a lesbian, Emma's early relationships with other women were very much illicit affairs. There was a lot of skulking around, parking down at the lake after dark, or sneaking away for weekends to the coast or Sydney where there would be a whole production in just getting a double room, she says. Emma remembers searching out hotels with underground car parks and internal access so that they could avoid having to go through reception together. One time in particular has stayed with her, which happened in the early 1970s. She and her partner were parked down at Lake Burley Griffin because that was one of the few places they could be alone together when a policeman appeared from out of nowhere and shone his torch in the car window:

> I can remember, I can remember that feeling to this day, feeling like we were these amazing criminals. And I mean, we were over eighteen, so we had every right to do what we wanted to do, but he shone the torch in, you know, and looked incredibly horrified and shocked, and told us to go home. And of course, we just immediately went home, because the police had told us to.⁷⁸

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⁷⁷ Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.

⁷⁸ Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
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Dee

In 1980 Dee moved from Melbourne to Canberra. She almost didn’t, as she was tired of moving and had created a nice life for herself in Melbourne. Nonetheless, she did eventually make the move and began the task of re-settling herself and her family. Two years later, when her husband took a job in Canada, Dee chose not to uproot herself and the kids again. This was to mark the end of her marriage and the beginning of her life as a single mother.

Ever since Dee’s first conscious awareness of lesbians when she was nineteen, she remained quietly fascinated with the idea and at certain moments was quite distracted by the feelings she had for women. Following the long infatuation she had in Denmark with the unknown woman at the swimming pool, when Dee returned to Australia she remembers another disconcerting experience. Living in Melbourne at the time, she had enrolled as a mature age student to do an Arts degree in Finnish at Melbourne University. There she found herself playing soccer and socialising with women in a way that she hadn’t since she was a teenager. She remembers in particular the time a whole group of them went away to Philip Island; among the group was a Swedish woman, Ann-Sofie, who Dee was very taken with. One night when they were all up late, talking and drinking, Dee in an uncharacteristically bold move asked Ann-Sofie whether she would like to sleep with her. Looking back Dee says (laughing), ‘I wasn’t even sure what I was asking!’ But then Ann-Sofie replied ‘Yes’, and Dee didn’t have a clue what to do about it. She doesn’t exactly recall what happened next, except to say that she probably drank some more and quietly stole back to the caravan she was staying in, closing the door and quickly feigning sleep. Alone.

By the time Dee finally did have her first sexual experience with another woman she was completely comfortable with her lesbian identity. She nonetheless describes her first sexual encounter as ‘a steep learning curve’; very quickly, it seemed to her, she went ‘from a kind of celibacy to juggling two relationships for about eighteen months’. Dee had adored the first of these women from afar for some time before she approached her only to discover that non-monogamy seemed to be part of the lesbian (feminist) deal. ‘It was a bit mad’ she says, ‘but also really nice, and I learnt lots!’

Leigh

In 1982 Leigh enrolled as a mature age student to do an Arts degree at the ANU. She was simultaneously thrilled and terrified by the prospect as she didn’t know anybody who had been to university and had no idea what it would be like and what would be expected of her. It proved to be an enlightening period in her life where she was
exposed to ideas and theories that would not otherwise have occurred to her, not the least of which were those to do with sexuality. ‘For me’, she says, ‘it wasn’t likely that being a lesbian would have occurred to me in my house in Melba. I needed a context for it to occur in.’ This context was university where Leigh came to mix with people who were interested in talking about sexuality, and specifically Women’s Studies, for it was there that Leigh was first aware of seeing lesbians.

It was around this time that two of Leigh’s friends started talking about the possibility that everyone was basically bisexual. This was a completely new concept to Leigh and yet, when her friends suggested that the three of them ‘do it’ together ‘to see what it was like’, she readily agreed.

Leigh describes the experience as an amusing if silly one, saying that they were all a little on the hysterical side at the time. Certainly it was not enough to convince Leigh that being a lesbian (or even bisexual) was the thing for her. She remembers asking one of the Women’s Studies staff how would you know if you were one and being told to ‘try it and see’.

Figure 35 Women’s Studies cartoon, 1978.

79 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
80 Since the inception of Women’s Studies at the ANU in 1976 and the cut-off date of this history, 1984, the Women’s Studies Program employed a considerable number of casual tutors, tutors, visiting lecturers, guest lecturers, and lecturers. As some of the material obtained in the interviews I conducted in the course of writing this history (and discussed in more detail in Chapter Six) allege instances of what would now be considered sexual harassment by several of the Women’s Studies staff, and because it is not my wish or intention to make recognisable any specific persons, I have chosen to simply refer to all categories of appointment as ‘staff’. In this context, throughout the thesis I use the generic term ‘staff’ regardless of whether the narrator herself has been more specific in identifying the staff member, and regardless of whether the issue is one of harassment or not – as is the case here where Leigh is referring simply to a comment made by a staff member. My intention in so doing is to increase the size of the pool of potential ‘harassers’ and as much as is possible to make individuals unidentifiable. In no way is it my intention here to claim that any particular staff member of the Women’s Studies program engaged in harassing or abusive behaviour. I want rather to be able to include material pertaining to the frequently overlooked, but very important, issue of (alleged) sexual harassment between women (as it appears in
PART III. PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Some time later, Leigh and one of the friends she had earlier experimented with, decided that they would try it again, this time with just the two of them. And it was on this occasion that Leigh thought ‘Oh! This is it. This is exactly what I’m going to do with the rest of my life.’ Leigh’s friend later went off and got married, but Leigh was hooked. Similarly to Erin, she recalls that she knew that from that moment she would be a lesbian even though it was some time before she took on that name to describe herself.

Kate

Kate’s first serious relationship with another woman began in 1975 and it was then that she truly accepted herself as a lesbian. Julie was also a student at the ANU and the two of them lived together on campus, at Lennox House. During the first year or so that they were together, neither one of them knew any other lesbians in Canberra. By 1977 however this had begun to radically change as more and more women involved in feminism started to ‘come out’ as lesbians. Prior to this Kate says that the only lesbians she and Julie knew were ones that lived interstate who they had met at various feminist conferences. Kate is quick to add, however, that there were other lesbians in Canberra but she didn’t learn of their existence until later. ‘There were other lesbians in Canberra’, she says, ‘ones … who weren’t feminists, but it wasn’t until later that I met them.’

It is, of course, unlikely that Kate and Julie were the only lesbians involved in feminist politics in Canberra in 1975-76 but the fact that they felt as though they were the only ones is worth taking seriously, especially when considered alongside Charlotte Bunch’s description of lesbian silencing at the IWY Women and Politics conference in Canberra in 1975 (see Part II). Kate’s experience indicates that the debates regarding lesbianism that were going on in the larger State capitals (and supposedly on a national level) within the women’s movement, were not necessarily heard by all self-identified lesbians and feminists in Australia during the mid-1970s. The experiences of all of the narrators in this chapter further indicate that ‘choosing’ to become a lesbian was not an easy choice to make in the 1960s and 1970s despite the emergence of gay liberation and women’s liberation during this period. Although some of the narrators described their first sexual experience with another woman as ‘familiar’ or ‘right’,

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two of the narrator’s stories) without fear of legal repercussions.

81 Interview with Kate, February 26, 1994.
none of them found coming out to be an overwhelmingly positive experience; and in many cases these experiences were further compounded when, after they came into contact with other lesbians, they found themselves subject to a community-driven set of rules they didn't yet know. The themes of finding other lesbians and negotiating lesbian communities are the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter Six

Finding the lesbians in Canberra

Audrey Hartmann, a narrator in Esther Newton’s history of Cherry Grove, vividly recalls the time she saw her first lesbians. It was 1953 and she was twenty-three years old. On holiday with friends in Ocean Beach she had heard talk that there were lesbians in nearby Cherry Grove. Audrey was afraid that her roommates would find out about her excursion if she took a beach taxi, so she hiked the five miles from Ocean Beach to Cherry Grove to see if there was any truth in the rumours. There was, and she remembers clearly her first impression of them:

The houses were all gas lamps, charming little houses ... And I remember seeing women by candlelight sitting there, and thinking, ‘Oh I wish this were I!’ I so well remember that ... I just said, ‘I have to come back and live here.’

There is nothing new about ‘finding the lesbian/s’, the practice itself is arguably older than the term ‘lesbian’ and has often remained somewhat separate to it. ‘Finding the

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lesbians' is a shorthand way of describing the process whereby a woman (or girl), after acknowledging that she feels somehow (usually sexually) 'different' to those around her, sets about (either consciously or unconsciously) locating another (or others) who also share a similar sense of alienation, isolation, or difference. Evidence of this process can be found in any one of the handful of recently published lesbian histories which, based in part on oral history, include stories of the lesbian past as told by the women who lived that past. Rarely, however, is the process as simple as deciding that one is a lesbian and going out in search of others; sometimes each of those stages takes years. What can be said about the process of 'finding the lesbians' is that it is a survival strategy in emotional, physical and political terms. In the foreword to *Finding the Lesbians: Personal Accounts From Around The World*, American Jewish lesbian feminist, Alix Dobkin describes this process as follows:

The very act of looking for each other transforms us. It signs us on to adventures in strange territory. It obliges us to confront unknowns. Looking for Lesbians is demanding, propelling some of us in mighty bizarre directions and prompting others into some mighty peculiar behavior ... When we find Lesbians, we find a difference: a hidden dimension. From one angle, the Lesbian universe we provide for each other may appear to be the same as the world most of us were born into, but it is not. A lesbian dimension, imperceptible to the non-Lesbian, the core and character of our world reveals the essential difference. Finding Lesbians constructs a universe in which we, for once, are central and crucial ... Finding the Lesbians is good for us and good for women.

In Chapter Five I focused on the individual experiences of the narrators as they moved through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood towards taking on a lesbian identity. In this chapter the focus shifts slightly: staying with the narrators' individual experiences, it moves onto how each narrator came to find other lesbians and how they came to be part of the lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra where I connected with them in 1994. Their experiences are not, however, easily compartmentalised or categorised. All of the narrators came to be involved in the lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra but of the eight, only two of them, Emma and Pat, had experienced lesbian community prior to that. Both of them initially found other lesbians via sporting activities, which introduced them to closeted but

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supportive social networks. The other six narrators came to find their first lesbian community in Canberra via involvement with feminism. For Dee and Leigh these experiences were directly related to their doing Women's Studies at the Australian National University (ANU); for Erin whilst Women's Studies played a role in her becoming part of the lesbian (feminist) community it wasn't the sole factor; and for Teresa, Jocelyn and Kate it was activist-based feminist involvement that led to them finding others like themselves. By drawing primarily on the remembered experiences of the eight narrators, this chapter explores what it was like 'finding the lesbians' in Canberra, and has as its focus the lesbian (feminist) community as it emerged and solidified during the 1970s and early 1980s. It opens, however, with the narratives of Emma and Pat, whose experiences of lesbian community preceded their involvement with feminism.

**An unspoken language: narratives of Canberra's pre-feminist lesbian social scene**

In the late 1960s, when she was in her mid teens, Emma 'found the lesbians' almost accidentally when she began playing competition hockey outside of school on weekends. 'Lesbian', however, was not a word much in favour back then. Emma says that she knew the word but didn't much like it. She explained:

> All the lesbians in the teams knew one another but we still didn't name it or talk about it ... It was still very much a negative word and I didn't use it myself ... to this day I still sometimes feel a bit strange saying it, you know? ... I still feel uncomfortable using the word 'lesbian' because it has always been a negative word.5

Emma remembers the hockey crowd as being closeted but also very supportive of one another. In her words:

> There were so many other lesbians playing hockey, but it's really important to remember, that in those days, you didn't go around 'spotting the dyke' like we do now. It was incredibly closeted, I was closeted ... We didn't speak about it, but it was really clear to all of us, in this unspoken language that you had in those days, that we were all lesbians. All the lesbians in the teams knew one another, but we still didn't name it or talk about it ... Only the women who have been lesbians all their life would know what I'm talking about. There's like this eye contact, there's like this instant - even though personality wise you could be completely like chalk and cheese – ... it's the kind of feeling of being in this minority group together and there's that kind of solidarity that's there as the base. There's kind of this warm feeling of 'we're in this together, we're experiencing the same sort of things, we

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5 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
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experience all that hostility, all that discrimination that nobody names' ... It's sort of like, you laugh at the same things - you could make a joke that only the other girls, the other dykes, would get. There were the unspoken things like not being in the least interested in any of the men in the room, there's a way a dyke would speak to a man that a straight woman wouldn't - you'd laugh at the way one of the girls had said that, and then there'd be this instant sort of getting ready in case it got tricky, you'd sort of get ready to band together.\textsuperscript{6}

It was always common knowledge, 'who was on with who', says Emma, although the words 'lover', 'partner', or 'girlfriend' were never used. At away-from-home tournaments arrangements were always such that couples would be in the same rooms, and Emma recalls that it wasn't uncommon for couples to fight publicly and be told to 'pull their heads in'. It was known and understood that they were lovers, but was never explicitly discussed in public.

After hockey games they used to go to the Deakin Inn to drink and play darts. This wasn't a gay venue by any means but their presence was tolerated and it provided them a public location where they could mix socially with one another. It was there that Emma experienced her first taste of lesbian community, of finding a place where she was accepted and understood. It was with that crowd that she nostalgically remembers experiencing 'that feeling of being with your own kind'. 'It's a hard feeling to describe', she says, but one you never want to swap, you know?' Emma classifies this time as one of the best periods of her life:

After every game we used to go to the pub. You know, we were incredibly big drinkers and backslappers in those days ... smoked like chimneys and had a great time. And no 'politics' you see - there was nothing that was politically incorrect, and that's what I really miss about those days. I really liked those days, even though there was all that discrimination that I'm talking about. I just loved those days of (pause) no-one analysed anything, you know?\textsuperscript{7}

Pat's experience, like Emma's, was initially through playing sport although in her case it was basketball not hockey. This contact resulted in her first sexual experience with another woman as well as giving her a taste of what it was like to be part of a community of lesbians. As outlined in the previous chapter, it had been a bittersweet experience because soon after finding them, the community turned on her forcing her to seek out lesbians elsewhere.

It was during this difficult period of ostracism that Pat somehow heard that a pub called 'the Ainslie' was holding gay nights on Fridays.\textsuperscript{8} She cannot recall how she

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\textsuperscript{6} Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
\textsuperscript{7} Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
\textsuperscript{8} In her recent history of the Ainslie, Kathleen Phillips writes that the Ainslie's Club Bar 'was rumoured
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came by this information, but she does remember clearly how, for many weeks, she spent Friday evenings driving by the pub unable to pluck up the courage to go in by herself. Eventually she was so desperate that she contacted Kim (her first lover from the basketball crowd) and asked her if she would go with her one Friday. In her words:

I don’t know how many Friday nights I drove past the Ainslie and wasn’t game to go in ... eventually, the first time I went I asked Kim ... in desperation I asked her just so I could see what it was like inside and where to go. It was just really frightening.9

Going to ‘the Ainslie’ with Kim proved to be a turning point for Pat, and she eventually was brave enough to go back on her own:

When I did, I walked up to the bar and ordered a drink and suddenly all these women went ‘Whoosh’! And they were around me. And it was some of the army dykes – there was 6 or 8 of them. I think they were the only women but they were just really friendly and welcoming. And I just didn’t look back after that!10

In Pat’s experience of ‘the Ainslie’, the women and men did not mix a whole lot although she says there was definitely a feeling of camaraderie between the groups. Pat quickly became part of the army dyke crowd and embarked on a fun-filled period of short, serially-monogamous relationships. She recalls the focus of the group as being about drinking and having a good time. Similar to the experiences of Emma with the hockey crowd at the Deakin Inn in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pat recalls


9 Interview with Pat, 5 March, 1994.

10 Interview with Pat, 5 March, 1994.
how public conversations were never explicitly about coming out or being gay. It was
only in intimate circumstances with one’s lover that such information was exchanged.

By the end of 1978, having had more than a dozen affairs with women, Pat was secure
and happy socialising with the camp crowd she had found at ‘the Ainslie’. And whilst
her crowd had heard rumours of a lesbian feminist crowd in Canberra, they had no
contact with them and no desire to initiate contact. Pat thinks that they were probably
more than a little threatened by these outspoken lesbians who seemed to have
opinions on just about everything. Pat’s crowd tended to avoid all things political,
preferring to socialise, drink and dance in the company of one another, and on the odd
occasion to join the gay boys at the drag shows held in the Carlton bar of ‘the Ainslie’.
In 1979, however, the seeds were to be sown for what would become known as
Canberra’s first ‘mixed marriage’ – meaning the first romantic partnership between a
lesbian feminist and a social dyke – or as they were described at the time, between a
‘femo’ and a ‘disco dyke’.11

This meeting of two different lesbian worlds occurred in Canberra a few years after it
happened in some of Australia’s other cities but almost a decade after it had happened
in America. On a national level, lesbian feminists in Australia were aware of ‘other’
lesbians as early as 1973. At the Radicalesbian conference in Sorrento the arrival of
Margaret Burnaskoni

... caused quite a bit of consternation. For a start she was considerably older than
all of us – at least in her fifties ... of our mother’s generation, and a lesbian. A
practising Catholic who wanted to work in the church. Whatsmore she didn’t fit in
with our style at all. We were very anti-feminine in our dress style. It was all ex­
army disposal and Mao-Tse Tung cap type gear ... She walked into the room – this
large, older woman, wearing a dress and all made up ... There was a stunned
silence. Who was this woman? No-one knew quite how to handle this. What would
we do with her? How could things go on as before with her there?12

Di Otto’s candid description of her attitude towards lesbians in Melbourne in 1976 tells
a similar story:

Like most lesbian feminists, I know little about lesbians outside the Women’s
Liberation Movement. We haven’t needed to because we have created our own

11 Kate suspects that the disco dyke reference emerged in the context of a place in Civic called the Key
Club which had a gay night on Sundays; ‘You had to have a key to get in the door’, she says, ‘it was
lesbians and gay men and they were mostly the non-feminist ones ... and everyone would dance disco’.
Kate is the only one of the narrators to recall the existence of the Key Club which she believes was open
only for a short period towards the end of the 1970s just prior to the Dickson Hotel opening its doors to
the lesbian and gay community. Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.

12 Chris Sitka, ‘A Record of the Melbourne Radicalesbians and the Radicalesbian Conference in Sorrento
round of parties, dances, bars and friends that is well apart from the furtive lesbian culture that has existed for years.\textsuperscript{13}

In Canberra, it was in part because she was burnt out from the endless grind of feminist organising, and in part because she was intrigued by who and what she might find, that Kate, a self-identified lesbian feminist, chose to go to the Tharwa Ball where she first came into contact with lesbians ‘who weren’t feminists’.

‘Disco dykes’ and ‘leso fems’: the Tharwa ball and one of Canberra’s first mixed marriages

In 1979 a mixed gay and lesbian ball was held in nearby Tharwa – in those days Tharwa was a tiny country village on the outskirts of Canberra some thirty minutes drive from the original city centre. It was a gala event hosted by a handful of gay men who had rented the local Tharwa Hall with the express purpose of putting on a dance and drag show for Canberra’s gays and lesbians. Attended by about a hundred people, the crowd camped out under the bridge next to the river near the dance hall where they all partied on into the early hours of the morning.

It was at the Tharwa Ball that Pat and Kate met for the first time. Prior to this event, Kate says that she had no contact with lesbians who weren’t involved in feminism. In her words:

\begin{quote}
Until about 1979 I didn’t have any contact at all with the ones who weren’t feminists ... the army dykes, you know, and the different women who weren’t at all into feminism.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Pat similarly had had no contact with lesbian feminists. She remembers noticing Kate at the dance but had been unable to decide whether she was a man or a woman. Pat recalls that she was not particularly enjoying herself at the Tharwa Ball and had decided to turn in early. She had just crawled into her sleeping bag, and was about to turn off her torch, when her tent was gate-crashed by three lesbians she didn’t know, one of whom was Kate. In later told versions of this pivotal moment, the gate-crashing lesbian feminists are reported to have said that Pat was less than hospitable, bordering on being quite rude about the uninvited intrusion. Pat herself however does not recall that as being the case.


\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
The morning after the dance, Pat and Kate more formally introduced themselves and ended up having a long conversation – the only thing that Pat clearly remembers the two of them talking about was bedding:

In the morning when I got up ... women were still sitting around and Kate and I got talking. What we remembered afterwards was that we had a long conversation about doonas ... the debate about doonas versus blankets.15

Many women hung around there for most of the day and one of Pat’s crowd took quite the fancy to Kate and invited her to ‘the Ainslie’ some weeks later. Kate, in turn, says that she actually ‘rather fancied’ Pat, and so decided to show up at ‘the Ainslie’ the following Friday. On that evening Pat recalls that there was a crowd of them sitting around a big table, the size of which made it impossible to talk to anyone other than the person on either side of you. When Kate arrived, she ended up sitting directly opposite Pat, but according to Pat, as the night progressed so too did Kate, moving around the table one chair at a time until she was sitting alongside Pat. Being a big drinker at the time has served to blur Pat’s memories of the night, but she imagines that she probably eventually came out with her usual line ‘Coming back to my place tonight?’ Kate’s memories of the night support this version of events; she recalls that she was quite blatant in her pursuit of Pat and eventually that paid off with an invitation along the lines of ‘Would you like to come back to my place?’ to which Kate unhesitatingly replied, ‘Yes please!’

This marked the beginning of not only Canberra’s first ‘mixed marriage’, but an intimate relationship between Pat and Kate that would last over ten years and even after it had ended would result in them maintaining a close friendship to the present day. From a contemporary perspective, Pat doesn’t remember the precise moment she realised that Kate was a feminist except that it wasn’t too long after they met. She thinks that at that time Kate may have been having a little time out from feminist activity as she had been involved with the women’s movement for some years and was a little burnt out. Kate, on the other hand, knew immediately that Pat was not involved in feminism and was duly teased by her feminist friends for even considering getting involved with a non-feminist lesbian. She remembers the shock value of their relationship as follows:

We were sort of the first, what Pat calls, ‘mixed marriage’ (laughing) that there was in Canberra. And her friends would go ‘Oh my god, she’s doing it with a feminist’ and my friends would say ‘Oh my god, she’s doing it with a disco dyke.’16

15 Interview with Pat, 5 March, 1994.
16 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
Kate’s experience of coming out in Canberra was markedly different from Pat’s largely because of her political involvement with the left and feminism. In the two years prior to her moving to Canberra, Kate became interested in a number of political causes. ‘At school I became interested in political things’, she says, ‘... stop the tours, and the moratorium was a big thing then as well’. She remembers being vaguely aware of women’s liberation as it was emerging in Sydney because she knew of a girl at school who was going to one of the early consciousness-raising groups. Kate recalls that she consciously stayed away from that girl because she suspected that involvement in women’s liberation implied that you were a lesbian. Towards the end of high school however, when a close friend of hers started going to a CR group, Kate went along too, only to discover that lesbianism wasn’t on the agenda at all. In her words:

At the very end of school, a friend of mine started going to a consciousness-raising group and I went too (pause) – although we didn’t talk about lesbianism there as it turned out! (laughing)17

The Mount Beauty conference, organised by Canberra women’s liberationists, at which the controversial lesbian paper was presented, took place in 1973, the same year that Kate moved to Canberra. She does not however mention it as a conference that she was aware of. Despite her brush with women’s liberation in Sydney, Kate had yet to be sufficiently convinced by the feminist position to get involved in the movement. Upon moving to Canberra, she lived on campus at Garran Hall and quickly became interested in student politics, getting involved with the ANU Labour Club (Revolutionary Communists). It was there that she first met women who were socialist feminists and became aware that there was another group of women on campus who called themselves feminists but who were not involved with leftist student politics. Gradually Kate became less interested in the left’s agenda and more interested in a feminist one. She describes how the shift from one to another happened for her:

The left wing men thought feminism wasn’t (and some of the women thought feminism wasn’t) as an important issue as the worker’s strike and the struggle against capitalism ... they [saw] it as a bit of a diversion, and they saw feminist women as not having the right priorities ... I remember one meeting at the ANU Labour Club at which one of the women raised as an agenda item ‘feminist issues’, and she didn’t get a very warm reception (laughing). But I was quite interested!18

Kate became involved with a group of women who saw feminism as a priority that existed outside the left’s agenda. She says that the group was made up of women who were a bit older than her, some of whom were students and some of whom weren’t.

17 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
18 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
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Kate thinks that some of them were involved with the initial women's liberation group in Canberra. The off-campus group was involved in a variety of things, she says, from the Aboriginal tent embassy to anti-Vietnam demonstrations. Whilst Kate was aware of the community-based women's liberation group, she herself was only involved with the campus-based group. In retrospect she thinks that she felt slightly intimidated by the other group, and felt as though they thought she was 'too young and inexperienced' to be a useful member.

![Image](ON THE FLOOR.png)

**Figure 38.**

In Kate's experience, the women's liberation groups in Canberra in the early-to-mid 1970s had few, if any, out lesbians in them. It was only through feminist conferences held interstate (and on occasion in Canberra) that she was initially exposed to lesbian feminists. In 1974, Kate began to re-examine her feelings towards women and, after spending the night with a girlfriend to see what it was like, decided that she probably was a lesbian. The following year, after leaving her male partner, Kate began a relationship with another woman, which was to last two years. Kate says that she was aware of 'more developed lesbian [feminist] communities in other [Australian] cities' and believes that her own sense of comfort about being a lesbian – despite the isolation she and her partner, Julie, experienced as lesbians in Canberra at that time – existed because she knew of the existence of these other communities. This knowledge helped make it possible for her and Julie to be 'open amongst all of the people [they] mixed with' at university.

Kate finished her studies at the ANU in 1976 but continued to be heavily involved with campus politics in 1977 and more specifically with a recently formed group of women who called themselves 'radical feminists'. By this time, Kate says, the lesbian tide had turned in Canberra and most of the women in the campus-based group 'were
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lesbians, or became lesbians, or dabbled in being lesbians.' The group was 'quite accepting of being a lesbian,' says Kate, 'and that was one of the reasons I was much more comfortable there than in women's liberation'.

Kate's largely positive experience of being a lesbian on campus in the mid to late 1970s was, not surprisingly, quite different from the working world which she simultaneously occupied. In the late 1970s when Kate first joined the Public Service, she says that she chose not to be 'out' at work (for the first few years) because it seemed a risky thing to do in terms of peer acceptance as well as in terms of promotion prospects. Nonetheless, in most ways, this proved to be a less solitary period than the mid 1970s had been; the numbers of women who identified as lesbian feminists continued to grow and along with the increase in numbers came a growing social scene where it became possible to meet others of a similar mindset. It was around this time that a lesbian group started meeting at the Lobelia Street women's centre; it didn't last all that long and was eventually replaced in 1979 by the Lavender Lounge.

Kate recalls that the Lavender Lounge was held fortnightly at Lobelia Street and whilst they would sometimes organise set discussions, it acted primarily as a social gathering. In her words:

I'm sure some women went there and didn't feel welcomed, but I think generally compared to what exists in Canberra now, it was much more welcoming – if a new woman came, the other women would talk to her and, you know, she'd become part of the group, part of the friendship group over time.

Looking back on her involvement with women's liberationists in Canberra in the mid 1970s, Kate wonders whether her perception of feeling unwelcomed by the off-campus group because of her youth and inexperience was only part of the picture. She speculates on whether it was also her perceived lesbianism that contributed to the situation being an uncomfortable one:

I wonder if it was also partly because I was a lesbian and I think that some of those women found the young lesbians quite intimidating ... They were slightly older – I mean, they weren't that old, but slightly older straight women who hadn't counted on that being, you know, one of the aspects of feminism. And I think they might have been a bit intimidated by us and unsure about us.

Kate's account of the gradual emergence of a radical feminist lesbian group in the 1976-1977 period indicates that Canberra was a few years behind some of Australia's other urban centres with regard to the creation of a lesbian (feminist) community. In

19 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
20 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
21 Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.
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Melbourne, Sydney, Hobart and Adelaide, these communities had already been in existence for a couple of years in the mid-1970s and were in the process of fragmenting at the time Canberra's lesbian (feminist) communities were only just beginning to organise events for themselves.

Figure 39 The publication of the Lesbian Issue of *Refractory Girl* in Sydney in 1974 was not something that would have happened in Canberra in the mid-1970s.
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Feminist-inspired events: conferences, dances and role models

For many of us, the feminist realisation that our lives were structured by male domination, that we were kept from each other and divided amongst ourselves, and that heterosexuality was centrally involved in that, was so overwhelming that it even transformed desire ... we are still here, and still arriving, those women so bowled over by our feminist insights that we revolutionised our desire.22

In the early 1970s, at the very time two lesbians were giving an introductory talk to women's liberationists in Canberra, three of the narrators, Pat, Leigh and Dee (living variously in Canberra, Queanbeyan and Newcastle) had either just married or were about to get married. In spite of the growing feminist climate in Australia and the emergence of gay liberation, their lives were to continue untouched by feminist politics or lesbian inclinations for another five to ten years. Similarly oblivious to the fact that the foundations were being laid for a lesbian (feminist) community which would one day impact enormously on their lives, Erin aged ten and living in a working-class slum in Scotland, was two years away from permanently leaving her homeland to come to Australia; whilst Teresa, also ten, was living in one of the newly established Belconnen suburbs, attending school and enjoying sexual play with other children in the neighbourhood. And Jocelyn, a year older than Erin and Teresa, was spending a final year in Thailand with her family before being sent back to Canberra to attend Girls Grammar School as a boarder. Of the eight narrators, Kate and Emma were the only two who were actually engaged in either feminist or lesbian pursuits in the early 1970s. In Kate's case, it was originally feminism that had sparked her interest, although it wasn't too much after that that she admitted to herself that the intermittent thoughts she had been having about other women since she was about fourteen, did in fact mean that she was a lesbian. For Emma, this was a period she remembers fondly as being about lesbian solidarity without the trappings of a political agenda; something that only came to exist, in her experience, when feminism entered the scene in Canberra.

By the end of the 1970s, the youngest of the narrators was in her late teens and the oldest twenty-seven. Feminist debates had been raging in America for almost fifteen years and in Australia for almost a decade – although only provocatively in the mainstream press since International Women's Year in 1975. Feminist ideology in the 1970s and 1980s impacted differently on each of the narrators. In the 1970s, Leigh had yet to find anything relevant for herself in feminism as she struggled to come to terms

with her failing marriage. Kate’s life, on the other hand, had been irrevocably changed by her involvement with feminism in the early-to-mid 1970s and her semi-related decision to identify as a lesbian. Pat, by the mid 1970s had found the lesbians, and in 1979 found Kate and so began her gradual entry into the previously unknown world of lesbian feminism. And Emma, who had managed to survive the 1970s without any feminist involvement as a largely closeted lesbian who worked alternatively in the Public Service and the community sector, in the mid-1980s begrudgingly took up her place in the lesbian (feminist) community when she began working in Women’s Services. Similarly to Leigh and Emma, three of the other narrators, Dee, Jocelyn and Erin, did not come into contact with feminism until the early 1980s. Of the five, it should however be noted, that Erin was struggling to make sense of the unformulated feelings she had about women’s position in society well before she found feminism. In retrospect Erin can see that she was unconsciously headed toward this thing called ‘feminism’. Feminism would provide her with a language that made it possible to speak about and understand her early sense of dissatisfaction about ‘woman’s lot’. It would also provide her with a theoretical means of combining these observations about women with her ‘gut socialism’ as ‘inherited’ from her working class background and her father’s political beliefs. Teresa, on the other hand, never had to actively search out feminism thanks to her feminist mother and sister and a fortuitous opportunity to do Women’s Studies at school.

Figure 40 In the mid 1970s, it is unlikely that any of the narrators (except perhaps Kate) would have interpreted this photograph through lesbian or feminist lenses. ‘Marg, Bronny, Nina, Trish, Chris, Lillian and “Brilliant Dog”’ featured in the Australian Woman’s Calendar published and distributed in feminist circles in 1976.
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In 1978 Teresa was one of the first students to enrol in Canberra's first secondary college Women's Studies course. The concept of feminism was not new to Teresa because of her mother and sister's involvement in feminist activities in Canberra but it was only through doing Women's Studies herself, and attending the first Women and Labour conference in Sydney, that Teresa says she came to understand the complexity of feminism, as well as finding for the first time, some positive lesbian role models. The Women and Labour conference, in particular, had a lasting impact on Teresa. It was there that she came appreciate the extent of the political divisions that separated feminists as well as being where she decided she was a lesbian (although she wouldn't act on this knowledge for some time). She recalls seeing socialist and marxist feminists debating the merits of issues like separatism, women-only space and class.

In spite of her growing feminist enthusiasm, Teresa's first attempt to get involved with community-based feminism in Canberra was not successful. When she heard about a group of women putting together an edition of the national feminist newspaper Rouge, she went with a friend to a production meeting at the Lobelia Street women's centre. Teresa remembers feeling decidedly unwelcomed by the women there who all seemed to be 'older dykes'. It is a curious coincidence that one of these 'older dykes' was, in all likelihood, Kate, who five years earlier, had herself felt that the existing women's liberationists didn't welcome her because of her youth, inexperience (and perhaps perceived lesbianism). Through reading her mother's copy of Wimminews in the late 1970s, Teresa was aware of other feminist activities in Canberra but it took her a few years to really find her own feminist niche.

One of the first feminist groups Teresa was involved with, was a women and theatre group, which she adored being part of. She remembers vividly that one of the women in the group was an 'out' lesbian who, in retrospect, stands out in Teresa's memory as being her second positive lesbian role model experience. Around this time, another group of women, the 'Duffy Street Dykes', had an enormous influence on Teresa. They were a household of activist lesbian feminists who lived in Ainslie at the bottom of the mountain. Through them, Teresa had access to feminist literature, as well as being witness to many discussions about feminism and lesbianism, and having access to the lesbian (feminist) social scene as it then existed, initially in the parties held by various households, and later at women's dances and women's bands.

Teresa thinks that the Duffy Street household anticipated that she would one day come out as a lesbian, but says that beyond providing a place for her to explore her options, both feminist and lesbian, they never tried to push anything on her. Having always been a bit of a flirt, with girls as well as boys, Teresa recalls during this period of exploration, quickly coming to the realisation that there was an element of danger connected to flirting with lesbians as compared to straight women; all of a sudden, she
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says, the boundaries shifted and there was no line drawn. After flirting, there was kissing, and after that it seemed as though ‘genital contact was looming’.

Teresa remembers an incident at one of the Duffy Street parties when the woman she was flirting with, who she believed to be straight, began responding very positively to her supposed advances. Teresa was mortified. In her own words, she says ‘she scared the pants off me!’ – only figuratively speaking however! Not long after that incident in December 1979, Teresa decided (and soon thereafter acted on the decision) that she wanted her first full sexual relationship to be with a man and not a woman.

The sense of disillusion the Canberra women’s movement was regularly plagued by in the mid-to-late 1970s had lifted almost completely by the very end of the decade. The early 1980s saw Canberra’s feminists rejuvenated as the movement entered into an energetic phase. The Lobelia Street women’s centre was scrubbed and painted, new furniture replaced old, and new office spaces were set up. More events and activities than ever before were scheduled as Canberra feminists took it upon themselves to organise their own social calendars: from women’s theatre to women-only dances featuring women’s music or women’s bands. The first ‘People Without Penises’ dance as advertised below and held at Pat’s old stomping ground, ‘the Ainslie’, was indicative of changing times and a growing separatist agenda within the feminist movement:

Canberra was witness, some ten years after America24, to a plethora of women-only events in the form of dances, quiz nights, bands and plays. By the early 1980s such events were being held regularly and were always popular gathering places for Canberra’s burgeoning lesbian (feminist) community. Although a reasonable number of heterosexual, bisexual and celibate women attended these women-only events, there was an underlying assumption that they catered primarily to a lesbian (feminist)

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24 In New York, for example, the first all-women’s dance, organised by the Women’s Caucus of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), took place in April 1970. See Martin Duberman, Stonewall, Plume Books, New York, 1994.
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These events were advertised in Wimminews, on community radio 2XX, at Tilley's (from 1984), at the ANU via the Women On Campus group and Women's Studies. Women's Studies had been on offer for more than five years at the ANU and was having a huge impact on the lives of many women. Three of the narrators, Erin, Leigh and Dee, enrolled in Women's Studies in the early 1980s and it came to feature prominently in their experience/s of the lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra in the early 1980s.

In the following section three of the narrators share their experiences – the good and the 'not-so-good' – of Women's Studies at the ANU. Precisely because some of these experiences do fall into the ‘not-so-good’ category, I reiterate here briefly my reasons (as footnoted in Chapter Five) for referring to lecturers and tutors generically as ‘staff’. It is not my intention to expose the identity of those individuals whom a couple of the narrators allege were guilty of sexual harassment, but rather to be able to add such problematic and important aspects of the recent feminist past to the historic record without fear of legal repercussions.

The impact of women's studies: juggling theory and practice

Dee enrolled in Women's Studies at the ANU in 1983 and says it was there that she met women in similar situations to herself: women who'd recently come out of marriages; who were single parents; and who had come back to university as mature age students. In total, that year there were probably half a dozen women who fell into that category. Women's Studies proved to be an eye-opener for them all. All the theory that they read during that year helped to make sense of their lives says Dee: 'It was like we'd waited our whole lives to read something that validated our feelings'. Dee remembers the whole atmosphere of Women's Studies as being incredibly supportive. The women she became friends with were especially supportive of each other throughout that first year, when they all changed quite radically and many lifelong friendships were forged.

Lesbianism was on Dee's mind at that time. When she had waved her husband off at the airport as he left for his overseas posting in 1982, she had realised she was never going to get involved with another man again; it just wasn't what she wanted and it seemed perfectly natural not to be involved with men any more. Throughout 1983 Dee began to identify more and more strongly as a lesbian even though she hadn't been sexually involved with a woman at that stage. She says she started to see it as a political thing as well as the fact that she just hadn't felt strongly enough about any one woman yet. She began to see it in terms of a whole identity that defied the lack of freedom generally ascribed to women, and quotes Adrienne Rich's ideas on...
compulsory heterosexuality as influencing her thoughts and feelings on lesbianism at the time. The choice to define herself as a lesbian felt freeing, different and totally natural. Apart from her husband's comments about being 'brain-washed' upon his return from Canada some two years later, Dee received no negative messages and says that she felt no pressure within Women's Studies to be (or not to be) a lesbian:

It just took me a long time to figure it out whereas I think a lot of young women today figure it out much more easily ... There was support but no pressure, I never felt pressure from other women, feminists or lesbians.

Dee is certain that she would have headed in that direction, whether she'd done Women's Studies or not, but readily acknowledges that it did provide a very supportive environment which undoubtedly influenced and hastened her experience of coming out.

Leigh met Dee doing Women's Studies at the ANU in the early 1980s when they both enrolled in the same course. Leigh's memories of Women's Studies, and of the lesbian (feminist) community, are overall less positive than Dee's. Leigh acknowledges that Women's Studies and university life in general provided her with the context to think about her sexuality, but she is also critical of certain aspects of 1980s feminism as she experienced it, which she believes were not specific to her alone. Her experiences in the 1980s support my earlier expressed contention that the rules that Jenny Pausacker so accurately exposed at the Radicalesbian conference in Sorrento in 1973 remained part of the lesbian (feminist) experience for over a decade.

According to Leigh, Women's Studies at the ANU was not particularly academic or intellectually rigorous in the early 1980s. 'I don't remember learning much feminist theory,' she says, 'but I did learn a lot of the feminist rules'. Leigh thinks that many women got swept up in the flow of 'what you were supposed to do' and remembers going to socialist conferences and the like without ever really understanding why she was there. She says that she never fully understood all the divisions: radical, socialist, WEL, women's liberation, and why they all seemed to be pitted against each other. Leigh recalls there being a strong, often implicit, message in Women's Studies, along the lines of 'all men are bastards' which carried with it the implication that 'even if you didn’t want to do it with girls you ought not want to do it with boys'.

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26 Interview with Dee, 18 March, 1994.
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Throughout her time as a student in Women’s Studies, Leigh says she was forever baulking at being included in the royal ‘we’ as it was espoused by the ‘in’ crowd: ‘We all know men are bastards’, for example.

Leigh found the ‘we all hate men’ position difficult as she didn’t feel that way about men but felt unable to voice her opinion. She is sure that others within Women’s Studies felt similarly constrained. Leigh found it hard to reconcile such a stance with her own life at that time. She was in the midst of exploring her newfound enjoyment of sex with men, and also had a young son who she had no interest in abandoning for the sake of feminism. Leigh tells how another woman in Women’s Studies, whom she later ended up having a long-term relationship with, was also silenced by these constraints:

She was married at the time but I don’t remember her ever talking in class about the fact she lived with a man – it just wasn’t on the agenda. Anger with men was OK, but not how to work it out with men.27

Handy Home Hints

Don’t throw away those odd tools!

There’s plenty of use for them still...

They make a rich, satisfying smoke...

Put a battery in one & give it to a maiden aunt – just like the real thing!

They contain a good decay-fighting toothpaste & cinnamon.

Make this charming, unusual centrepiece – large colour range to match any decor.

Figure 41

The ‘all men are bastards’ concept was popular in the 1970s and early 1980s. Generally there was humour in the approach but it nonetheless made life difficult for many feminists, especially those who had male children and/or male partners.

27 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
Leigh recalls that there was a lesbian agenda tenuously connected to Women's Studies at the ANU during the time she was there. Lesbianism was not overtly discussed in the courses, she says, but was more of a social scene that one was 'invited' into. In her mind, there was definitely an 'in group', made up of both staff and students, which consisted predominantly of lesbians. Gradually, once she had decided that she was a lesbian, Leigh slowly made headway in gaining access to this group, and eventually began to be invited to parties which were largely lesbian (feminist) gatherings. Similarly to Emma's experiences in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Leigh remembers that for her, it was only on an individual level that the topic of lesbianism and coming out were talked about. In her words:

> It was only on an individual level that talk about being a lesbian happened for me - going off with other girls and talking about their lives. I found it very fascinating. I learnt about lesbians living with each other; I never knew that people outside marriage lived with each other.28

It is interesting that Leigh's experiences echo Emma's even though gay and lesbian literature was now being published at an astonishing rate. And indicates that it is problematic to assume that the publication and existence of gay and lesbian literature has any bearing on the experiences of individuals. Leigh's first serious relationship with a woman was a somewhat clandestine relationship with one of her children's school teachers, Tess. Leigh took her lead from Tess who was the more experienced of the two of them. She believed that their relationship was premised on monogamy and it was several months before Leigh realised that Tess was in fact already in a committed relationship and living with another woman. When Leigh discovered this betrayal of trust she was shattered. Like Erin, she was surprised that women would behave in such a way. 'I hadn't thought that women would do that to each other,' she says, 'I was really upset about that for a long time.'

Years later, Leigh remembers being approached on more than one occasion by people saying, 'I remember how you were back in Women's Studies but I always knew you had the makings of a good feminist'. To Leigh's mind such comments implied that she didn't have it 'quite right at the time' and supported her belief that there had always been a 'right' and 'wrong' way of being a 'feminist' back then: at the time she says a good feminist was definitely a lesbian. Whilst she believes such comments were meant as compliments, she always found them to be quite the opposite.

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28 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
At the time of interviewing in 1994 Leigh believed that a crucial aspect of the lesbian (feminist) past in Canberra had yet to be dealt with by the community. The rampant (often sexual) abuse of power by lesbian feminists in its early years has never been discussed in an open and constructive manner, she says. In 1992, the academic feminist community in America gasped in collective horror when two female students pressed sexual harassment charges against American Professor, Jane Gallop.29 How could it be that sexual harassment procedures were being used in such a punitive way? How was it possible that they were being used by women against not only a woman, but a feminist? Was it not a petty, vindictive, and even anti-feminist, gesture on the part of Gallop’s students to initiate charges on the basis of an allegedly playful public kiss? In the wake of the very public Gallop case, feminists were rudely forced to face the fact that women were capable of using sexual harassment laws against one another. For many feminists, however, it was even more shocking to have to consider the possibility that women themselves were potentially capable of same-sex sexual harassment and abusing their power.

One of the legacies of the Gallop case and ensuing feminist debate, and one that has not been paid much attention, was the space it opened up for women to retrospectively re-think and redefine their experiences within feminist environments in the period prior to the existence of this thing called ‘sexual harassment’. Such a space made it theoretically possible for feminists to transpose the notion of sexual harassment onto past experiences. Furthermore, it provides us with a means by which we can be constructively critical of aspects of our ‘revolutionary’ past. Kate Darian-Smith has written eloquently of the importance of memory in how we frame our identities and understand our social past, carefully noting that these memories are not static. She writes:

It is through memory that we frame our sense of individual, group and national identities, give meaning to our own life history, and understand our social past. Our individual memories, however, are constantly supplemented, altered and mediated by the circulation of representations of the past that constitutes collective memory.30


30 Kate Darian-Smith, ‘War Stories: Remembering the Australian Home Front During the Second World War’ in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 137.
In other words, memory both structures and is structured by the world in which we live and the constantly changing representations of past and present that are available to us at any given time.

Two of the narrators, Leigh and Erin, recalled separate instances of sexual harassment within the feminist environments they occupied in the early 1980s at a time when they were relative newcomers to feminism. I would suggest, based on the notion that our memories are 'constantly supplemented, altered and mediated' by the representations available to us, that the gradual inclusion (and acceptance) of sexual harassment/sexual abuse rhetoric into the mainstream in the period between the time of the alleged incidents and the interviews contributed to these later interpretations of both narrator's earlier experiences. Both remembered feeling uncomfortable at the time of the alleged incidents but simultaneously felt unable to voice their objections saying that it was only with the clarity brought on by time and further life experience that they came to view their experiences as sexual harassment and an abuse of power. Both women also went on to suggest that in the 1970s and 1980s such incidents were prone to happening because at the time feminist communities were new entities that were constantly evolving as women explored, individually and collectively, what it meant to be 'feminist'. That Leigh and Erin provided similar empathetic explanations as to why the alleged harassment emerged is worth noting. Neither one was motivated by a desire to make public a specific perpetrator, they were instead concerned by the silence surrounding such issues and wanted them acknowledged and put on the feminist record.

Leigh relates two separate incidents of sexual harassment: one concerns her own experiences with a feminist counsellor and the other pertains more generally to a staff member's behaviour at a Women's Studies camp.

The first of these experiences came about soon after Leigh joined the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC) collective in the early 1980s where she was surprised to find that there was little or no space there for the women involved as collective members or workers to actually heal themselves: 'You were supposed to be something before you were it', she says. Realising that she did need to do some personal work around incest and rape Leigh saw her only option as not only going outside of the Rape Crisis collective but also the insular feminist movement as it existed in Canberra. She eventually went to Melbourne to attend a mixed-sex self help group where, trusting the female counsellor leading the group, she disclosed information about the sexual abuse she had experienced as a teenager. A short time later when Leigh was back home the counsellor came to Canberra, contacted her and expressed her desire have sex with Leigh. Leigh knew that she didn't want to sleep with this woman but as she was still a little unclear about the new boundaries she had encountered in the lesbian
(feminist) community she was beginning to get involved in, thought something along the lines of: ‘Oh, she’s been nice to me so now I have to be nice to her’. So she slept with the woman, all the while wishing she’d just go away. At the time the situation made Leigh feel decidedly uncomfortable, but it was to be quite some time after that incident, when she was studying to be a counsellor herself, that she came to realise just how inappropriate and (potentially) damaging this woman’s behaviour had been.

The second of these abusive instances Leigh remembers happening at the Women’s Studies camps in the early 1980s. These gatherings she remembers as being ‘enormous piss-ups’ where lots of alcohol was consumed, and where women would couple up with each other, and sometimes with some of the staff who according to Leigh ‘did not behave in a very appropriate way’. Leigh recalls how confused she was by the behaviour of one staff member at one of the first Women’s Studies camps:

They’d been lots of women sitting up and drinking and singing songs, and then some of them went to bed. And then there were about six or eight women sitting around and she went around fondling all the women’s breasts that were there ... It did feel incredibly uncomfortable but none of us said that to each other, we just pretended that it wasn’t happening.31

Many years later Leigh remembers she did speak to some of those women about that incident and others similar to it. In retrospect she thinks that when that sort of thing happened in those days, it did so in the context of newness and discovery, along with an unspoken feeling that women should be able to trust each other. ‘It was all such new territory’ she says, and those women new to feminism tended not to have (m)any boundaries around what was OK and what wasn’t.

Erin was one of the ‘in’ Women’s Studies crowd that Leigh mentions in her memories of the time. Not, however, that Erin perceived herself in such a way. She was out as a lesbian by the time she began doing Women’s Studies in the early 1980s and admits that she may well have been seen as fairly radical at the time. It is true, she says, that a number of Women’s Studies students, as well as staff, used to socialise together at the university bar and at parties, and most of them were lesbians. And whilst from her perspective that didn’t feel as though it was an ‘in’ crowd, Erin can see that it may well have appeared that way to women in the process of coming out:

I think the lesbians tended to congregate together ... If we’d go to the bar afterwards, after the lecture, it wouldn’t be unusual if the lesbians all made contact

31 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
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with each other – to just go ‘Right, right, right, right, we know who we are’ sort of thing.  

The more practice-oriented side of women’s liberation, like consciousness-raising, did not much appeal to Erin who was much more interested in learning about feminist theory by the time she began doing Women’s Studies. Unlike Leigh’s memories of the Women’s Studies course content during these years, Erin remembers it as being highly theoretical, covering a wide range of topics like: psychoanalysis, semiotics, gender roles, sex stereotypes, socialism, social conditioning and nature/nurture. It was pretty comprehensive, she says, and the emphasis was very much on the academic side of feminism. Unlike Leigh’s experience, Erin does not recall any particular correct feminist line or agenda but she says that the theory and language was jargon-heavy and quite inaccessible. She says this resulted in Women’s Studies being ‘a very rigorous academic program’ and one that she didn’t think many women kept up with. ‘I think’, she says, ‘that there was a lot of pretence that women were keeping up with the theories’. The tutorials, Erin says, were sometimes a bit CR based, which at the time she found frustrating but which she later realised were valuable and absolutely critical to the experiences of many of the women doing Women’s Studies:

It was a great frustration for me and for Paula at the time – we used to discuss this at length – but tutorials in Women’s Studies became a bit of a consciousness-raising group. And, in fact, looking back that’s a very wonderful and good thing that happened, you know? But for people like me whose consciousness had already been raised, I was after the theory and that’s all I was interested in. And when anyone started to go on about ‘Well last night I was home with the kids and he said …’ I’d just switch off. But a lot of the women had to really work through a lot of that stuff …

During these years Women’s Studies camps were popular events and Erin herself went away on a few such weekends. She remembers them as revolving around prescribed readings and discussions around the campfires.

I think we’d set ourselves homework before we went and all do readings about different topics and have discussions around fires and things like that. Cook dinner together and eat together. It’s very good to ‘break bread’. And build that sort of feeling of solidarity as well. There was a lot of feeling of, you know, strength in the group. Friendships were formed that I know have lasted for years and years and years. It was a very special thing for a lot of women who participated.

32 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
33 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
34 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
Nonetheless, the camps were not all solidarity building in a supportive feminist environment. In 1983 Erin recalls being sexually harassed for the first and only time during her university years. She describes what happened one night after everyone had turned in for the night:

It's the only time I was ever sexually harassed at university - by ... [a staff member]. She got into bed with me ... It was just bizarre, it was just awful - it really was. She'd done this look deep into my eyes and I'll tell you all about your past lives trip on a whole lot of people that day. There were all these huge fights between ... [the staff]. It was hideous; I was a pawn in somebody's massive power play and, um, I didn't enjoy that experience very much.36

Another thing that Erin recalls as being connected to an odd sort of feminist agenda was the way her relationship with another student, Paula, was constructed and perceived within Women's Studies. She describes it as a kind of 'manipulation' which grew from the unfounded myth that they were in a relationship when in fact they weren't although they had slept together. 'We didn't create the myth', she says, 'but we did go along with it'. Some months later when she and Paula did enter into a girlfriend relationship their behaviour continued to be scrutinised and idealised, by the Women's Studies crowd. When publicly faced with the assumption that they were a 'non-monogamous politically correct couple' Erin recalls their private response: "'US?!' We would think. "US?!" But we're just making it up as we go along.'

Outside of Women's Studies, and her involvement in student politics at the ANU, towards the end of 1982 Erin also got involved with community-based feminism when she, like Leigh, joined the CRCC collective towards the end of 1982. It was here, Erin says, that she really felt a sense of community with other lesbians sharing similar feminist goals.

A shifting social scene: the influence of feminism

The threefold meeting of gay, lesbian and feminist worlds, happened in Canberra almost a decade after it happened in American cities where it tended to happen quite explosively. This was not the case in Canberra, however, where the meeting of these worlds may not have had the approval of all those who inhabited them, but nor did it result in ongoing hostilities between the separate communities. If a collision can be described as gentle, it was by all accounts a gentle collision. The dearth of readily accessible information about the recent lesbian (feminist) past as it was played out in

36 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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other Australian cities makes it difficult to offer an accurate comparison of a more geographically close location although speculation would probably lead one to conclude that the situation in Canberra was different not only from America but from other Australian cities as well. In Sydney, for example, a gay liberation contingent joined one of the early Women's Liberation Movement marches.

Figure 42 Members of CAMP and gay liberation join a women's liberation march in Sydney, 1972.

In this section I have chosen to organise the narrator's experiences of the period 1980-1984, when these worlds did collide in Canberra, around the two main venues where lesbians met socially: the Dickson Pub (known variously as 'The Dickson' and 'The Dicko') and Tilley's Devine Café-Bar (known more commonly as 'Tilley's').

Unlike many of the other capitals, Canberra did not have its own specifically gay and lesbian venue - one consisting of bricks and mortar rather than a floating gay night or afternoon – until the late 1980s when the Meridian Club opened its doors. And it wasn't until 1999, well after all other capital cities apart from Darwin, that Canberra

37 The Meridian used to have gay nights at the ANU bar in the early and mid 1980s which were popular with both sexes. Once it became a permanent venue in Braddon its clientele became increasingly male although it did try to accommodate lesbians by having women-only nights. The Meridian club, as Canberra's longest running permanent gay venue, recently closed its doors for the last time taking with it a piece of Canberra's gay and lesbian past.
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instigated a celebratory gay pride festival. In his chapter, 'Consolidating the Community', Graham Willett refers to a 1973 list of 'strictly gay spots' which appeared in the gay publication, Stallion. According to this list Sydney had ten, Melbourne five and Adelaide just one. These 'venues' included gay nights and segregated areas in certain establishments where gays were able to socialise. According to Willett, the situation had much improved by the mid 1980s with gay venues (including pubs/bars, restaurants, cafes and accommodation) existing in all capital cities. Drawn from the February 1984 issue of Campaign, Willett lists Sydney as having 38, Melbourne 22, Brisbane 14, Adelaide and Perth 10 each, Darwin 6, Newcastle 5 and Hobart 3. Despite Willett's assertion that ALL capital cities had gay venues at this time he does not provide any information about specific venues in Canberra.

The Dickson Pub

Apart from those early days of going to the Deakin Inn after hockey games, and the occasional trip to Sydney to go to a gay night club, Emma says that she really wasn't big on frequenting gay bars in the 1970s. She was aware of 'the Ainslie' having a gay following in the 1960s and 1970s although she herself never went there, and prior to that she recalls that the Hotel Canberra (now the Hyatt) acted as a gay watering hole on Saturdays when they had Jazz 'n' Jug aftemoons. She was vaguely aware of the Jet Bar and the Scottish Bar at the Canberra Rex on Northbourne also catering to a gay clientele at some point. The one gay venue that stands out for Emma was, however, the Dickson. Emma remembers this venue, with its big bar and dance floor very fondly. 'The Dickson was really great', she says, 'it was really good because ... again there was not all that political stuff.' In those days, according to Emma, the gay men and the dykes used to mix together at the Dickson, and have picnics, parties, and BBQs, at each other's places on weekends.

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38 This is not, however, a well promoted event like the Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne festivals - I hadn't heard of the Canberra event until I read about it in Graham Willett's recently published history of gay and lesbian activism in Australia. And then I realised that there had in fact been a selection of lesbian and gay films screening over a condensed period of time in the Spring of 1999 and 2000. That, I deduced, must have been Canberra's gay pride week!

39 In a later list, also drawn from the February 1984 issue of Campaign, Willett does list the ACT as having ten gay and lesbian groups or organisations. See Graham Willett, Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 196-7.

40 For a history of the Hotel Canberra, including mention of Jazz 'n' Jug evenings in the 1960s, see Ann Gugler and Elizabeth Plimer, 'From Hostel to Hyatt: The Hotel Canberra' in Purchase (ed.), Canberra's Early Hotels, especially p. 45.
'The Dickson', she says, in her experience also acted as a code word for coming out to other lesbians in the Public Service. Once again, as in the days of the Deakin Inn, Emma says there was a certain eye contact and a feeling of togetherness that existed between closeted dykes in the Public Service in the early 1980s. Emma remembers an occasion when she had just started in a new department, which illustrates the coded language that was often the only means of safe communication between lesbians in public places and at work. Emma wanted to let another woman know that she recognised that she was a dyke but did not want to publicly out her by saying it outright:

Like she gave me that look but she wasn’t quite sure. She sort of gave me that look of ‘Well you might be but I’m not quite sure so I’m not going to give you the full look’. And I said ‘Oh, I’ve - I’ve seen you before’ and she said ‘Oh - where?’ and I said ‘Oh, up at the Dickson’. And then she gave me that look as if to say ‘Oh right, now I know’ (laughing).41

Emma explains how that was a safe way of getting and receiving information because if you’d got it wrong the person wouldn’t respond appropriately but you wouldn’t have given anything away either. Only a dyke would have known what the Dickson meant in that context.

Despite the fact that the Dickson is one of only two venues that all of the narrators have a memory of (even if they didn’t actually ever go there themselves) it has proved to be a remarkably difficult task to ascertain the dates, if not the years, it actually served as a gay venue.42 While general consensus between narrators would suggest that the Dickson was a gay venue for varying amounts of time during the 1980-84 period, Emma’s memory of the length of time the pub was around spans over a decade from the early 1970s to the time Tilley’s opened in 1984. Whilst this was almost certainly not the case, it is interesting to speculate as to why Emma’s memory of the Dickson has expanded so dramatically. Speculating as to why one narrator may remember things differently to another is, however, is a process that should not be undertaken lightly. Feminists, Judith Stacey and Katherine Borland, have both voiced valid concerns about the potential for exploitation in the ways narrator’s experiences are interpreted.43 In their eyes, to simply denounce Emma’s memory as wrong, would

41 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
42 The physical building that once housed the Dickson Pub is no longer in existence.
be evidence of a kind of duplicity in which the researcher betrays the narrator. If, as Borland says, the performance of personal narratives are ‘a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a “self” to their audience’, the researcher has a responsibility not to attack or judge these senses of self in their ‘scholarly representation of those performances’\textsuperscript{44}. In this instance, a more ethical interpretation would look beyond the dates themselves to ask why Emma’s recollection of the Dickson may have been so exaggerated. This could be as simple as suggesting that Emma’s sentimental attachment to the pre-Tilley’s period may have led her to chronologically inflate it and everything in it. And indeed, other parts of Emma’s narrative would support such a notion. To a certain extent, Emma does blame the opening of Tilley’s for the demise of the Dickson as a thriving gay venue. After Tilley’s opened she says, ‘you could have shot a cannon through the Dickson – there was hardly anyone there’\textsuperscript{45}.

Kate’s memory of the shifting social lesbian scene in Canberra recalls the Dickson was a gay venue in the early 1980s in the wake of ‘the Ainslie’ and the Key Club. Unlike Emma, she remembers the Dickson as being about different groups of lesbians, lesbian feminists, and gay men socialising under the one roof:

> And [the Dickson] became then, more of a mixture of different feminist and not-feminist lesbians and gay men. Quite a mixture of people went. Probably it was in 1980. It was sort of less for the ones [lesbians] who weren’t feminists. It was a bit more accepting and not so under the carpet, or in the closet, or whatever. It was a bit more of an open place to go.\textsuperscript{46}

Like Kate, Teresa remembers the Dickson as opening its doors to a gay clientele in 1980, and continuing as such for three or four years. The limited number of alternative venues in Canberra at the time saw the Dickson become popular with many fringe groups. As Teresa describes this period:

> It was sort of a funny time in Canberra. There were a limited number of venues for alternative things, and so you would have at an alternative gathering a mix – from your radical politicos, to your feminists, to your lesbians, to your environmentalists, all under the same roof.\textsuperscript{47}

According to Teresa, this sort of mixing set Canberra apart from larger cities, like Melbourne and Sydney, where it was possible for alternative groups to meet and socialise entirely separate from one another. Whilst the largest contingent at the

\textsuperscript{44} Borland, ‘That’s not what I said?’, p. 71.

\textsuperscript{45} Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.

\textsuperscript{46} Interview with Kate, 26 February, 1994.

\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
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Dickson was of gay men, Teresa says that a mixture of alternative groups could also always be found there. Teresa herself was involved with a man at this point but she used to go to the Dickson with the women's theatre group that she was involved with. Sometimes they would go to the Dickson with the sole purpose of promoting their plays – one occasion is etched in Teresa's mind when they were doing a play set in a girl's school and they went to the Dickson to promote it:

We were promoting it on one of these nights when 'Salvation Jane' was playing. And I turned up in my school uniform – well, you know, for the play! I was in my 'costume', and lots of flirting was happening and I was quite used to that and quite comfortable with that.48

Teresa, also however, remembers the Dickson as being fairly cliquey and unwelcoming if you went there on your own; she recalls that the married women in her theatre group were sometimes hassled there if they were wearing wedding rings. Nonetheless, she loved hearing the women's bands perform there, especially 'Salvation Jane'. It was to be the place where she would consciously decide to make a move on the woman who was to become her first female lover:

The night that I put it to this woman. It was 1982. My mum and dad had been there that night because they really liked 'Salvation Jane' and my ex-partner David was there. We'd just broken up and I didn't want him to be there at all ... and I'm sure he wanted to be there because he knew what would happen. Like I was on the loose ... I couldn't wait for him to go, and my parents ... I wasn't going to make a move with the three of them there!49

Once again, at this juncture in her narrative, Teresa pauses to make the additional point that 'only in Canberra' would such a mix of people be not only possible, but almost even likely under one the one roof.

The Dickson does not rate highly in Leigh's memories as being a welcoming and friendly place. She recalls that it was a big place with a dance floor and that she occasionally saw women's bands like 'Salvation Jane' and 'Domestic Dirt' performing there in 1983. Leigh also remembers that Manhattan's (near Woodstock) in the city was an alternative venue, and says she used to go dancing there frequently with groups of women. Rather than there being specific lesbian or gay venues, in the early 1980s Leigh remembers this as a period when there were lots of organised feminist events: women-only dances; women's theatre; women's bands; women-only workshops; and visiting performers like Holly Near and Robyn Archer.

48 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
49 Interview with Teresa, 27 February, 1994.
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Erin was a regular at 'the Dicko' from 1982 onwards, and for a period of time she both worked and socialised there. Prior to 'the Dicko', she had frequented the Scottish Bar at the Rex with a group of lesbians and remembers that year as a bit of a wild one. In that one year, she says she slept with more women than she has throughout the rest of her life combined:

Like that was the sort of standard thing to do. Go to the Dickson Hotel on a Friday night and go home with someone ... That was like what you did. It was alcohol-based, it was this meaningless fucking thing – that was the culture that was there. Unless you were in a couple in which case it was only a matter of time before there was some crisis ... There was no notion of long-term stability like, you know, relationships. In fact, the women that I was hanging around with in that particular year, they used to actively put shit on women in relationships – it was not a cool thing to do.50

Erin’s memories of ‘the Dicko’ are perhaps the most detailed of the eight narrators – not surprisingly perhaps, given that she did actually work there and had access to more information about the venue than those who went there socially, usually at night. Erin’s memories, like Teresa’s, suggest that ‘the Dicko’ catered primarily to a gay male clientele. Erin describes it as a male meat market, saying that on most gay nights when the place was full – and it was a big place – there would rarely be more than six tables of women. According to Erin, the women there ranged from the army dykes to the feminists (both lesbian and not), but she doesn’t think that much mixing occurred between these groups or between the men and the women. In fact, Erin recalls there being quite a lot of antagonism between misogynist gay men and lesbian feminists, as well as ongoing brawls over whether or not drag queens should be allowed to use the female toilets. ‘I was there on two occasions when there was a brawl’, she says, ‘an out-and-out brawl between the men and the women – they were throwing things at each other, and throwing punches, and tables were being overturned.’51 As a result of this antagonism there was an unsuccessful attempt in 1982 to turn the pub into an exclusively gay male bar. Additionally, every now and then, the women would make a concerted effort to take over the place by organising women’s bands and getting as many as 300 women to attend. Erin was eventually sacked from the Dickson because she refused to act as an informant. It was the second time she had lost her job for being loyal to either herself or other lesbians.

On the first occasion, Erin was sacked from Belconnen K-Mart not long after she ‘came out’ when a woman she’d known and worked with for a long time asked her whether

50 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
51 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
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she was bisexual. When Erin said yes (which she maintains she would have answered if the woman had asked whether she was a lesbian as well), the woman refused to work alone behind the service desk with her. Erin was soon thereafter demoted to the check-outs on the grounds that she was ‘causing trouble’. Not content or comfortable with that solution, the woman who had initially refused to work with Erin organised a group of workers to say that they were unwilling to work with her on the grounds of her self-confessed sexuality. As a result of this incident, Erin was sacked. Having been the casual union representative for three or four years by then, Erin took the matter to the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Union and spoke to the person in charge. He said to Erin - and this she says is a direct quote: ‘If you are a lesbian and you’ve been working with young women you should have been sacked years ago’. The idea that lesbians are predatory creatures, out to defile young women is not a new one. Nor is a history of sacking them from their jobs on the assumption of such behaviour. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sydney’s first policewoman, Lillian Armfield made it her duty to stamp out all forms of ‘sexual deviation’ and she harboured a particular interest in exposing lesbians. She especially wanted to expose lesbians in employment, which placed them in close proximity to innocent, young women. In Armfield’s words:

In some of the city’s biggest department stores several women have been blacklisted because of this activity [lesbianism]. They have sought jobs among a lot of girls for the sole purpose of selecting likely converts to their perversion. Sooner or later, and the sooner the better, this menace will have to be faced by the authorities. It is a menace too serious to be ignored just because it is such an ugly and unpleasant issue to drag out into the open ... I repeat my firm belief that the authorities should try to do something positive to stamp out the growing cult of lesbianism.53

The circumstances whereby Erin was sacked from her job at the Dickson Pub in the 1980s were equally distressing. The Dickson Pub actually consisted of three bars and Erin worked all three including on occasion the gay night on Fridays. One week when

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52 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
she turned up in black and whites for her mid-week shift, she was told to come instead on Friday night dressed in 'civvies' and to find out who the women grafitti-ing the toilets were. Management wanted names and for them Erin would be paid for a full shift. She refused to do it and was immediately given the sack. Once again she took her case to the union, this time the Federated Liquor Union, and was told it was 'no go' because she was only a casual. For a little while she boycotted the pub but there weren't that many options if you were a lesbian so that didn't last long.

Aside from the conflicting time frames, the varying experiences of the Dickson Pub as remembered by the narrators provide an illuminating example of how readily memories are framed by individual experience(s). Taken together, these memories provide us with a rich collage of place. The Dickson undoubtedly marked a pivotal moment in the history of lesbian (and gay) life in Canberra. It was the most frequented, longest-running, mixed gay venue to ever exist in Canberra up to 1984. Based on the collective memories about the Dickson there can be no doubt that its existence in the early-to-mid 1980s profoundly influenced the experiences of significant numbers of Canberra's lesbian and gay population.

Tilley's Devine Café

'TFor years women had tried in vain to get the Canberra Club and other male enclaves to open their membership to them. Women had been allowed to enter the capital's public bars since the early 1970s, but these were not places where they felt entirely comfortable. Tilley Devine's opened to fill a demonstrated need. Here was somewhere in public for women to eat, drink and gather with the same ease that men have when they enter cafes and bars. Here, in other words, was a night life for women.'

Figure 44
Proprietor, Pauline Higgisson, outside Tilley's, late 1980s.

The arrival of Tilley's Devine Cafe-Bar at the Lyneham shops in 1984 did not go unnoticed in Canberra by lesbians, gays, feminists, and heterosexuals alike. A café-bar run by women for women was a radical

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54 Tilley's Devine Cafe-Bar is named after Sydney's most famous brothel-keeper, Tilly Devine. In the interests of clarifying the different spellings in this chapter - Devine, the person, spelt her name without an 'e' (Tilly); and the Canberra café is spelt with one (Tilley).

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concept in Canberra in the mid 1980s because such a venue had never existed there before. When it first opened its doors in January 1984 Tilley’s consisted of little more than a long narrow corridor with a handful of booths down one side and a bar down the other. But what Tilley’s lacked in size it more than made up for in décor and ambience. Painted deep burgundy, and dimly but tastefully lit, proprietor Pauline Higgisson had managed to transform a vacant dental surgery at a then ‘untrendy’ suburban shopping centre into what was arguably ‘the most civilised watering hole in town’.

No amount of charm and ambience, however, was going to help Tilley’s avoid becoming the target of community hostility because of its ‘women-only’ bar policy. The furore surrounding Tilley’s ensured that no Canberra venue was more talked about. As legal battles were waged and fought, the first client base of Tilley’s established itself. Women, outraged that establishments like the Canberra Club still operated men-only areas without the harassment being hurled at Tilley’s, were prepared to defend this proposed space, this new territory where women, for once, were being put first. Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community had a new home.

If the Dickson Pub can be said to have been the most influential mixed gay venue in the period up to the mid 1980s, Tilley’s must take its place as the most influential women’s venue Canberra has ever seen, but especially so for the impact it had on lesbians, and perhaps more particularly on those who called themselves lesbian feminists, throughout the 1980s. Similarly to the Dickson Pub, all of the narrators have different memories of Tilley’s. Taken together, their stories provide a collage of experiences, which help to bring the 1984 Tilley’s back to life. Jocelyn, for example, describes her impression of Tilley’s in its early days as follows:

It was a narrow little tunnel of a place, really quite small. And I remember when I first went there it was really quite scary because it was like, ‘Oh my God, this is a lesbian sort of place!’

Jocelyn got over her initial fear fairly quickly and was soon a regular day-time customer. She describes the crowd she hung around with at the time as being largely unemployed, into recreational drugs and exploring their newfound sexuality with each other. ‘I guess you sort of end up mixing with people who are at the same stage

as you in terms of discovering things', she says, 'we were all so excited about all the
new stuff that was going on'. In those days, according to Jocelyn, there was a strict
sense of how one should behave as a lesbian – it was quite a separatist stance, based in
part on men being the enemy. Jocelyn remembers that they used to call men 'mutants',
an ideology she would no longer subscribe to but which undoubtedly had its place
back then, along with 'mocking the [patriarchal and capitalist] system'.

In one sense, Jocelyn says she was in the throes of her lesbian adolescence when
Tilley’s opened, and it provided her and her similarly placed friends with the perfect
venue to continue their explorations. In her words:

I started on my lesbian adolescence you know, going out to dances, to Tilley’s and
meeting heaps of women, probably within six months going out with about six
different women kind of one after the other ... with everything being kind of wrong
you know, being lusty and excited and then it not really working but that was
alright – ‘Oh never mind and then on to the next one ...’ (laughing)\(^{59}\)

According to Jocelyn there was a lot going on socially for lesbians in the early-to-mid
1980s: lots of women’s bands like ‘Girls Night Out’ and ‘Somerset Boulevard’; women-
only dances at the ANU bar; and the Manhattan bar for dancing late at night. But it
was Tilley’s it seems that provided the constancy necessary to create, nurture and
sustain Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community.

Jocelyn never got over feeling nervous about going to Tilley’s by herself at night
although she was always happy to go there during the day. In spite of having a
women-only venue like Tilley’s, she thinks it would have been difficult for a new girl
in town to crack the lesbian scene. Apart from the tough bouncers on the door, Jocelyn
puts her own nervousness about going to Tilley’s at night down to a ‘shyness about
being looked at and not knowing how it worked in terms of affairs, who was there,
who was safe to talk to’.\(^{60}\) She remembers that sometimes men would try to get in
unaccompanied and the women would unite to get rid of them. According to Jocelyn
all sorts of lesbians frequented Tilley’s, from the sporty dykes to the public servant
dykes, as well as itinerant dykes – the students and the unemployed. In spite of her
nervousness about Tilley’s at night, Jocelyn insists that the often heard rumour that the
army dykes hung out behind the bar next to the toilet where they would heckle and
grope women, is just that, a rumour – or in her words ‘an urban myth’. Erin, on the
other hand, vividly remembers that the army dykes had a large presence at Tilley’s in
the mid 1980s. ‘When Tilley’s was a small, discreet, dark venue there were gangs of

\(^{59}\) Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.

\(^{60}\) Interview with Jocelyn, 27 March, 1994.
army dykes', she says, 'two or three gangs of 8 women – or more than that ... big tables full of women.' When I asked Erin how she knew they were army dykes she replied:

> It would always get pointed out to you but how would you know? It’s not as though they were more overtly butch/femme ... and it wasn’t like short hair cuts and uniforms. There weren’t these obvious signs but when you’d engage them in conversation [which was easier to do when you were the barmaid she added] they’d say ‘I’m in the army’ ... Like, it WAS true but I’m not sure how we knew!

Leigh had no problems about going to Tilley’s on her own, especially on Friday nights when you were guaranteed to know someone there. ‘You could always go there by yourself and find someone you’d know’ she says, ‘It was the hub of lesbian social life. I guess I came out into that social scene.’ The early days at Tilley’s, Leigh remembers as being ‘fairly wild’ with much alcohol consumed, much dancing and ‘lots of fucking’. Similar to Jocelyn’s description of her lesbian adolescence during these years, and Erin’s a few years earlier, Leigh recalls this as a time, which for her was filled with ‘sexual encounters’ with different women. There was nothing particularly serious about these liaisons, she says, it was simply the way it was; for example, if you wanted one you could pretty well be guaranteed a one night stand at Tilley’s on a Friday night. Leigh generally went to Tilley’s with the girls from university, not all of them were lesbians but many were women who liked to hang out with other women, so they went to as many women-only things as they could together. There were lots of groups of different women there: university students, teachers, workers from Women’s Services, feral dykes and army dykes. The groups didn’t generally mix together although individual women would sometimes move between groups depending on how broad their individual networks were.

As part of the same crowd as Leigh, Dee went to Tilley’s most Friday nights in 1984. The women she socialised with then were mostly ones she had met doing Women’s Studies at the ANU and they have remained, for the most part, close friends into the present. According to Dee, feminism was the common bond between them, it ‘direct[ed] where we went and where we’ve all gone!’ Dee doesn’t remember any of the groups of women who frequented Tilley’s as being especially exclusive and unfriendly towards other women. She says that while you could pick out or describe ‘certain women as sporty dykes, anyone could play cricket or go drinking’, the boundaries between groups were not rigid.

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61 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
62 Interview with Erin, 13 April, 1994.
63 Interview with Leigh, 7 April, 1994.
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According to Dee, the early-to-mid 1980s was a time of change when it came to what was socially available for women in Canberra to do with one another. Tilley’s was obviously a monumental step for lesbians in Canberra as it provided a social environment where women could go to meet other women but it was only one aspect of the social scene. Dee remembers 1984 as being a particularly full year with all manner of events and activities happening from women’s theatre to women-only dances, bands and performers. Whereas in the preceding year a lot of time and effort had gone into making IWD memorable, in 1984, the entire year seemed memorable to Dee. She herself remembers getting involved in women’s street theatre actions, starting work in one of Canberra’s first women’s refuges and joining the Abortion Counselling Service collective, as well as attending a great many women-only social events and generally finding her place in the continually evolving lesbian (feminist) community.

Of all the narrators, Emma was the only one to express outright distaste for Tilley’s – as mentioned earlier in the chapter, she blamed it, in part at least, for the demise of her favourite stomping ground, the Dickson Pub. And yet, Emma says, she went to the opening of Tilley’s with an open mind, expecting it to be wonderful, only to be sorely disappointed in the reality of the place. Given the lack of options where lesbian socialising was not considered an oddity or offensive, Emma did however return to Tilley’s, despite never feeling as though she fitted there. With each visit, she felt she had less and less in common with the women who were there. Compared to the Dickson, says Emma, Tilley’s never felt a friendly place to her. And when, around this time, the women-only events and dances started happening more and more frequently, she felt even more alienated from the strange community of lesbian (feminist)s. Emma held this community responsible for destroying the lesbian and gay world she had previously and happily inhabited.

Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community: public and proud

The first lesbian community to exist openly in Canberra evolved out of feminist activity but was not the result of any particular strand of feminist organising and encompassed socialist, radical, liberal and to a certain extent, even non-feminists alike. When compared to the larger urban centres in Australia and the majority of American histories of lesbian community, such a phenomenon is unusual. Lillian Faderman, for example, describes the context in which such communities came to exist in America:
Despite detractors and the philosophical obstacles they represented, the radical lesbian-feminists forged ahead to create a unique community and culture. While their community encompassed only a fraction of American women who loved women, it was their image of lesbianism that dominated the 1970s.64

In Canberra, the lesbian (feminist) community grew out of a diverse range of feminist groupings in the 1970s which had emerged directly out of, in reaction to, or as a later somewhat less direct consequence of, the original women's liberation group and the slightly later to emerge, Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL). Many of these groups are still in existence today whilst others have changed names, and others have disappeared altogether. They include: Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC); Abortion Counselling Service (ACS); Canberra Women's Refuge; Toora Single Women's Shelter; Medea (now Innana); the Canberra Incest Centre (now merged with CRCC); Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS); Lowanna Young Women's Refuge, Women's Information Service (WIS); Women on Campus (WOC); ANU Women's Studies; Lesbian Line; and Feminists Anti-Nuclear Group (FANG). In the early 1980s all of these groups shared, at the very least, a feminist agenda of some sort. Additionally, most of the women involved in them identified as lesbians. In their very 'woman-centred-ness' these groups fostered the possibility, creation and continuation of a lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra.

One of the unwitting consequences of this new lesbian (feminist) community was that, similar to the situation as it happened in America over a decade earlier, it served to further marginalise those women who lived as lesbians outside of feminism. These women had one of three choices if they came into contact with the lesbian (feminist) community of the 1980s, they could: accept the feminist ideology that accompanied being a lesbian in such a community; keep their opinions to themselves; or remove themselves from the community. Emma recalls how betrayed and confused she felt when some of her friends chose the first of these options:

Dykes like me who'd been dykes all their life, who became feminists ... I couldn't understand why they were re-questioning stuff about our friends, you know? Like, you know, the guys that they had known for a long time, now they were starting to see them in a different light.65

Pat's experience, as reiterated below, of being a pre-feminist lesbian who came into contact with feminism via her relationship with Kate provides another example of how the new community treated those who did not conform to the feminist ideal.

64 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 218.
65 Interview with Emma, 8 April, 1994.
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Although Pat’s experience was not directly linked to her lesbianism, it does indicate how inflexible the community was around ideologically sound or politically correct feminist behaviour.

A short time into their relationship, Kate and Pat both became involved in establishing and running one of Canberra’s first women’s refuges. For Pat, this signified her first real involvement in the feminist community, and she recalls it as being something of a rude awakening. She was continually taken to task for her unsound behaviour without it being sufficiently explained for her to understand why it was deemed unsound. In particular, she remembers being reprimanded for saying ‘goodnight ladies’ after collective meetings and not knowing why that was an offensive thing to say until someone took the time to ‘re-educate’ her on the matter of appropriate feminist language. Coming to terms with the rules inherent in this strange new feminist ideology was a long and difficult process, she says, and often times it led to her feeling isolated and inadequate even though she was supposedly surrounded by her supportive sisters. The process of thinking about her past, her bigoted upbringing and learning how to think and formulate opinions was made even more difficult by the constant feeling that she wasn’t a ‘good enough feminist’. Pat never quite managed to learn how to ‘toe the feminist line’ firmly believing that the notion of a correct feminist line was nothing short of hypocritical because it made ‘people bury many of their issues’. Eventually, once she decided that it wasn’t a question of her ‘getting it wrong’ but was symptomatic of the tyranny of feminist collectives, Pat left the refuge. She maintained a healthy distance from collectives from that point on. Her feminist involvement however, had also served to distance her from her old camp army crowd who, for the most part, had retreated from the half-closeted, semi-public arena they had occupied at ‘the Ainslie’ into the suburbs and the individual friendships they had formed in the old days.

It was not only the pre-feminist lesbians whose lives were suddenly complicated by Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. It is important to remember that in addition to these women, there were others doing battle with and for their sexuality in the suburbs believing themselves to be the only ones to feel that way, as well as others still who had no interest in claiming a lesbian identity even though they engaged in same-sex liaisons. Such women ranged from those who were content to live quiet and unobtrusive lives with their female lovers, to married women who chose to engage in clandestine same sex relationships which allowed them to live out their same sex desires without compromising their heterosexual lifestyles. The furore surrounding the opening of Tilley’s which sparked much sudden public debate on lesbians, sent many of these women even further into the closet.
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Equally important too, is the fact that the existence of a lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra in the late 1970s and early 1980s did not necessarily equate to positive experiences of coming out, or an exclusively positive involvement in that community. The early sexual experiences of Leigh and Erin are witness to that. Similarly, the existence of a feminist community in Canberra in the 1970s had little impact on the struggle/s Jocelyn and Dee faced in their individual journeys to taking on a lesbian identity. Likewise Kate and Teresa’s initial attempts at quite different times to become involved in the feminist community in Canberra proved it to be less than welcoming.

It may be true to say that the existence of an identifiable lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra made it easier for women to find other lesbians if they so chose. However, despite that, and as evidenced by the narratives of the women included here, coming out into the constantly changing feminist environment in Canberra in the 1970s and early 1980s, was rarely an easy option. It would seem that coming out during this later period was equally as challenging but in vastly different ways to coming out and living as a lesbian in Canberra’s pre-feminist environment as indicated by the experiences of Emma and Pat. It would seem then, that whilst the emergence and rapid expansion of gay, lesbian and lesbian (feminist) communities in recent decades may have made finding one another easier, for most, coming out still begins as, and carries moments of being, a solitary and sometimes scary experience.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis my aims and objectives have been multiple and overlapping. In the first instance, ‘She Gave Me That Look’ was inspired by the oral narratives of eight ‘ordinary’ women’s experiences of same sex desire between 1965-1984. The resulting history has been structured around the common themes drawn from these narratives and situates them in relation to Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community. This history has not focused on the eventual disintegration of Canberra’s lesbian (feminist) community, as alluded to by several of the narrators in 1994, but has rather explored the events and conditions that motivated its creation in the first place. Covering the decade from 1970-79, I have provided a detailed account of how, under the momentum provided by women’s liberation, Canberra came to have a women’s house, a women’s centre and a lesbian (feminist) community. I have also provided a short history of lesbian and gay activism in Australia in the early 1970s and compared its evolution to that of its American and British counterparts. This deliberate effort to incorporate feminist and lesbian (and gay) concerns together in one history allows ‘She Gave Me That Look’ to contribute to feminist history as well as the field of lesbian (and gay) history; it adds a localised account of women’s liberation to the broader historical tradition of second wave feminism and makes a timely contribution to the slow-to-emerge field of lesbian history in Australia.

Researching and writing this history has not been a simple endeavour but ultimately it has been a rewarding one. In order to formulate an appropriate methodology, I have drawn on a variety of fields, including anthropology, oral history, ethnohistory, sociology, lesbian and gay history and feminist studies. In the process (as discussed in Chapter One), I have learnt that generalised observations and statements about oral history, whether they take the form of critiques or feminist interventions, tend not to be very useful for memory-based projects that fall outside a normative white, middle-class, heterosexual framework. Working the oral narratives of Pat, Emma, Leigh, Dee, Kate, Jocelyn, Erin, and Teresa, into a coherent history of same sex desire in Canberra has therefore been more of a challenge than I had first anticipated. The version of the past as told is always dependent on a wide variety of things, from the relationship between the narrator and researcher, to the interpretations and representations currently in favour. Any attempt to incorporate oral narratives into accounts of the past needs to acknowledge such variables. The different shapes that the narrator’s stories might take in different contexts does not, however, make them – as critics of oral history would believe – overly subjective and unreliable historical sources. In this
CONCLUSION

instance, the complex array of possible stories, and the final narratives shared, provided me with a valuable source which made it possible to glimpse 'behind the [existing] words and manoeuvres of the [lesbian (feminist)] past' and to transform that past into something that is contingent, idiosyncratic, and 'real'.

The inclusion of the eight 'ordinary' women's narratives in this history has helped make it possible to write a democratic and representative history of the recent lesbian (feminist) past in Australia. 'She Gave Me That Look' prioritises the experiences of those who were active in Canberra's lesbian (feminist) community in the 1970s and 1980s, but who were not the movers and shakers of the original Women's and Gay Liberation Movements in Australia. As case studies, the eight narratives offer valuable insight into a number of issues which would likely be overlooked in a history that focused on activism and the movements' leaders. By acknowledging, locating and documenting 'ordinary' lesbian experiences this history challenges histories of the recent lesbian, gay, and feminist past that prioritise activism, key figures and men. As outlined in earlier chapters, histories of the homophile, gay and women's movements that already exist are critical to our knowledge of the recent lesbian, gay and feminist past but in and of themselves they are not enough. Although focusing on political movements and their leaders may provide historians with a useful chronological structure for documenting the recent lesbian, gay and feminist past, such structures cannot easily accommodate the experiences of those who existed outside of, or parallel to, the initial movements. In Australia, because we have produced so little, we are well placed to avoid 'homogeniz[ing] experience to the point where individual voices are lost sight of'. Lesbian history in Australia is well placed to take advantage of the innovative methodological approaches that have recently surfaced more globally in the field of gay and lesbian history.

Contributing to this field, are three recently completed doctorates on same sex desire between women in Australia. The first of these, completed in June 2000, was Ruth Ford's, 'Contested Desires: Narratives of Passionate Friends, Married Masqueraders and Lesbian Love in Australia, 1918-1945'. It was followed, a few months later, by Lucy Chesser's '“Parting with My Sex for a Season”: Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life, 1850-1920'. The last of the three is this thesis, '“She Gave Me That Look”: a history of lesbian (feminist) community in Canberra, 1965-84', completed in January 2003. Each thesis spans a different period, encompasses

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CONCLUSION

differing geographical locations, and is premised on a different methodological approach. All three were begun in the early 1990s, and the length of time each took to complete can be read in part as testimony to the complexities involved in researching this largely neglected area. Taken together, and separately, each one makes a unique contribution to the field of lesbian, gay and queer history in Australia, and beyond.
APPENDIXES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Appendix A

Interview dates

Kate (b. 1955) interviewed 26 February 1994
Teresa (b. 1961) interviewed 27 February 1994
Pat (b. 1952) interviewed 5 March 1994
Dee (b. 1953) interviewed 18 March 1994
Jocelyn (b. 1960) interviewed 27 March 1994
Leigh (b. 1953) interviewed 7 April 1994
Emma (b. 1952) interviewed 8 April 1994
Erin (b. 1961) interviewed 13 April 1994
Appendix B

Preliminary Questionnaire: Lesbian Life in Canberra, 1965–84

This questionnaire is directed towards women who lived in Canberra for any length of time between the years 1965–84 and who either came out as lesbian (or gay) or who had some involvement with the Canberra lesbian community during this period. Some of the following questions may require responses too lengthy for you to answer in detail – note form is fine. As well as being a record for me, the purpose of this questionnaire is to give you some idea as to the content of the proposed interview and to give you time to think about your responses.

1. **Personal Background**
   - Name?
   - When and where were you born?
   - How long have you lived in Canberra? Dates?
   - Briefly jot down in chronological order what you see as the major milestones of your life.
   - How do you feel about the term ‘lesbian’? Is it a word you would use to describe yourself? If not, what do you prefer? If you do identify yourself as lesbian (or gay), how long have you done so?
   - At what stage in your life did you become intellectually aware of lesbianism/homosexuality? Childhood? Adolescence? As an adult? How did you find out? What did you find out?
   - How do you remember your first attraction to another woman/girl? Did this attraction/experience precede your intellectual knowledge of lesbianism/homosexuality?

2. **Social Settings & Political Influences**
   - What did you do socially? Who did you predominantly socialise with?
   - How did women go about connecting with other lesbians if they were from out of town or in the process of ‘coming out’?
   - Were you politically active in any way between 1965–84? If so, how?
   - Did the Gay Liberation Movement have any impact on your life? Do you recall any gay liberation events/action/activities happening in Canberra?
   - Prior to 1984 were you involved with the Women’s Liberation Movement in Canberra? If so, how were you involved?
Interview guide and questions

This is an interview with (name of interviewee) who was born on (date of birth). The interview is being conducted by Judith Ion on the (date) at (address of where interview is taking place). I want to begin by thanking you for agreeing to be interviewed ... 

... & before we get into the interview proper by asking you whether you had any problems with or questions about the preliminary questionnaire you were kind enough to fill in ...

... I have a flexible structure I'd like to follow for this interview, which begins with the more personal details of your life & eventually moves onto external things like social settings and political influences.

1. Personal Background

Perhaps you could begin by telling me a bit about your childhood – where you were born, where you grew up, who your family consisted of?

In the preliminary questionnaire one of the questions required you to jot down the major milestones of your life ... I wonder if you’d mind just running through them?

As you know, I’m interested in looking at lesbian life in Canberra between 1965 and 1984 ... How much of that time period where you in Canberra? What did your life look like? What were you doing? During this time did you ever identify as lesbian or gay?

I want to take a step back again now ... What do you remember of your first attraction to another woman or girl? How old were you? How did you react to feeling that way?

Do you remember how old you were when you first learnt intellectually about lesbianism/homosexuality? What did you learn? How did you respond? Did you relate it to your own experiences (if relevant)?

Throughout your childhood/adolescence what sorts of information about lesbianism/homosexuality did you have access to? What kinds of messages did you get about lesbianism/homosexuality from this information?

i. family/parents

ii. literature/books

iii. school/peers

iv. religion/church

v. the media (newspapers, news bulletins, magazines, movies, television etc)

What or who would you say most influenced your ideas about lesbianism/homosexuality?

Do you remember the first time you heard lesbianism being talked about in a positive way? Who by? Saying what? Do you remember what your response was?

What do you consider to be your first lesbian experience?

(IF RELEVANT) How old were you when you ‘came out’ as a lesbian? What did this mean to you?

If you ‘came out’ to your parents, friends, at work etc, what was the response?
Appendixes

Well that brings us to the end of the personal background section, so if you’d like to stop for a break before moving on ...

2. The Social Scene: Lesbian Networks in Canberra

How, when and why did you get involved with the lesbian community in Canberra? What do the words ‘lesbian community’ mean to you?

What did you do socially? Whom did you predominantly mix with?

What options were available to women who wanted to meet other lesbians? How difficult do you think it was to make contact with lesbians if you were new to the scene or from out of town?

Can you remember the names of Canberra’s lesbian/gay bars during the 1965-84 period? Where they were located? When were they open in? Who frequented them?

(IF RELEVANT) If you had children, how did this affect your experiences of lesbian life during the years 1965-84? Was it difficult for you to meet other lesbians? Did the women with whom you predominantly mixed also have children?

3. The 1970s: the impact of liberation politics

Do you remember any particular political groups as being particularly active during the 1965–84 period? Not including gay liberation and women’s liberation were you involved with any political parties/groups between 1965–84? (IF RELEVANT) Did your lesbianism have any impact on your political involvement or vice versa?

I want now to spend some time focussing on gay liberation and women’s liberation.

Gay liberation

Were you aware of or involved with the Gay Liberation Movement in Canberra? To what extent and how were you involved? For how long? Did you identify as a lesbian when you first became involved with gay liberation?

Do you recall what sort of size the Gay Liberation Movement in Canberra was and how visible were they?

(IF RELEVANT)
- How was it organised/structured? By whom and for whom?
- About how many people were involved?
- What were the main concerns of gay liberation in Canberra?
- What was the ratio of gay men to lesbians in the group? Was this ever an issue?
- Why did you become ‘uninvolved’?
- What relationship did the Canberra Gay Liberation Movement have with branches in other States? With overseas gay liberation organisations?
- Do you think that the Gay Liberation Movement made it easier for individuals to come out as lesbian or gay? Why/why not?

One parting question on the topic of gay liberation ... In the US it is commonly assumed that the Stonewall riots triggered the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement – do you have any idea when, how and why gay liberation began in Australia?

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Women's liberation

Were you involved with any group connected to women’s liberation in Canberra prior to 1984? Which group/s? When? What did your involvement entail?

When you first became involved with that group (X) did you identify as a lesbian?

Do you recall what the ratio of lesbians to non-lesbian women was in X?

How was ‘the lesbian question’ dealt with in the part of the movement with which you were involved (if at all)?

Do you think that women’s liberation made it easier for women to come out as lesbians in Canberra? Why/why not?

One final question and we’ll wind up – in the US the first known lesbian group, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), was founded in 1955. A branch of DOB was also founded in Australia – do you have any idea when this branch was founded and what they called themselves?
Appendix C

The following histories documenting the male homosexual experience in Australia are listed chronologically by date of publication. Unpublished theses are separately listed at the end.

1984

1986

1988

1989

1990

1991

1992
Appendixes


1993


1995


1996


1997

Graham Willett, 'Mostly Harmless: Liberalism and Homosexuality in Australia in the 1960s' in Martin Crotty and Doug Scobie (eds), Raiding Clio's Closet: Postgraduate Presentations in History, History Department, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 1997.

1998

Clive Moore, 'Pink Elephants and Drunken Police: Bohemian Brisbane in the 1940s' in Aldrich and Wotherspoon (eds), Gay and Lesbian Perspectives IV. Studies in Australian Culture, Department of Economic History and the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1998.

Bruce Baskerville, "'Agreed to without Debate': Silencing Sodomy in 'Colonial' Western Australia, 1870-1905' in Aldrich and Wotherspoon (eds), Gay and Lesbian Perspectives IV. Studies in Australian Culture, Department of Economic History and the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1998.
Appendixes

1999

2000

Unpublished histories
Appendix D

This appendix lists Australian-based lesbian and cross-dressing (as indicated by an asterix) histories that have been published over the last two decades. It does not include histories pertaining to the gay and lesbian movement more generally. Included are chapters, articles and unpublished theses and papers. Apart from one edited collection, *Words from the Same Heart*, and the cross-dressing biography of *Eugenia: A Man*, no full length books have been published in the field of lesbian history in Australia to date.

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Wills, Sue, ‘Inside the CWA – The Other One’, *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*, No. 4, June, 1994, pp. 6–22.
Appendix E

Women involved in women’s liberation in Canberra as listed in the Canberra Women’s Liberation Newsletter, 1970-76

This list does not claim to be a full and entire list of all those involved in the Canberra Women’s Liberation Movement between 1970-76, but serves as a starting point for others interested in researching this period of feminist organising in Australia. In some instances the women listed may have been primarily involved in WEL* or campus-based WL** – wherever possible this has been indicated with asterisks.

Names are listed alphabetically by first name as last names are all too frequently absent and appear here after being later deduced. Names that appear in square brackets indicate the probable full identity of a woman by means of an educated guess based on context and period as documented in the newsletters and offers further information as to later name changes where they are known. Names in bold indicate probable involvement over a period of more than one year.

1970
Alyce [Mackerras]
Biff [McDougall, now Ward]
Cecily Parker
Dale [Dowse, now Sara Dowse]
Dee Hunter
Eileen [Haley]
Gerdina [Bryant]
Helen
Lexi McCawley
Liese
Lyn Moore
Marion
Sue

1971
Alison Richards
Ann van der Duys
Beryl Henderson
Betty Richardson
Biff McDougall [now Ward]
Cecily Parker
Dale Dowse [now Sara Dowse]
Daphne Gollan
Dee Hunter
Eileen Haley
Elizabeth Reid
Erica
Gail Wilenski
Gerdina Bryant
Glen Naughten
Hazel Steiger
Helen Robertson
Helen Shepherd
Jenny Oswald
Jo Gibson
Kerry Regan
Lexi McCawley
Lorraine Merrony
Lorraine Tilley
Lyn Harasymiw
Malkah Seligman
Polly Firth
Robin Craig
Ros Fraser
Ros Lamb
Tasmin Donaldson
Win Abernathy

1972
Alison Richards
Alyce Mackerras
Ann O’Leary*
Anne Anderson
Anne van der Duys
Barbara Guthrie
Barbara King
Barbara Scott
Beryl Henderson
Betty Richardson
Biff McDougall [now Ward]
Carol Ambrus
Caroline Coombes
Claire McGrath
Dale Dowse [now Sara Dowse]
Daphne Gollan
Dee Hunter
Denise Bott
Dorothea Hackman
Dorothy Darroch [now Broom]
Eileen Haley
Gail Wilenski
Gerdina Bryant
Glenn Naughten
Helen Robertson
Helen Shepherd
Inge Disney
Irene Thom*
Jan Baskerville**
Jeanine Perriman
Jenny Oswald
Jenny Shapcott**
Jill Humphries
Jill Millar
Jo Gibson
Joan**
Joy Morrison
Judy Cooper
Julia McFarlane [now Ryan]
June Anderson
Kim Morgan
Laura Jones
Linda White**
Lindsey Bews*
Liz Ross
Lorraine Merrony
1972 cont’d
Lorraine Tilley
Louise [King]
Lyn Harasymiw
Appendixes

Margaret Ryan
Margo[t] Snyder
Meredith Ardlie*
Pat Eatock
Patricia Woodcroft-Lee
Priscilla
Ros Fraser
Ros Lamb
Sonja Hamilton
Sue Wills
Sue**
Susan Butler
Susan Eade [now Magarey]
Sylvia Passioura
Tanya
Tasmin Donaldson
Thelma Hunter
Tricia Fyfe
Win Abernathy

1973
Alyce Mackerras
Andree Wright
Ann
Anne Wellman
Barbara Russell
Beryl [Henderson]
Betty Richardson
Biff MacDougall
Carol Ambrus
Cindy [W.]
Claire McGrath
D.Y.
Dale Dowse
Daphne Gollan
Dee [Hunter]
Eileen Haley
Elizabeth Reid
Frances
Gail Wilenski
Glen Naughten
Helen McCallum
Helen Robertson
Helen Shepherd
Inge Disney
Jacki**
Jean Gollan
Jennifer Watting
Jenny Shapcott**
Jill Humphries
Jill Muddle
Jo Aldridge
Jo Gibson
Julia Freebury
Julia McFarlane
June Anderson
Laura Jones

Liz Ross
Lorraine Tilley
Louise King
Lyn Harasymiw
Margaret Ryan
Margo[t] Snyder
Noel
Pat Eatock*
Ros Fraser
Sonja [Hamilton]
Sue [Eade, now Magarey]
Sue Dixon
Tricia [Fyfe]
Victoria Green

1974
Barbara Mummery
Beryl [Henderson]
Biff [McDougall, now Ward]
Cecily Parker
Cindy W.
Dale [Dowse, now Sara Dowse]
Inge D[isney]
Jan Morgan
Jenny Oswald
Jenny Owen
Jo Aldridge
Julia [McFarlane, now Ryan]
Kerry Regan
Liz O’Brien
Liz Ross
Manda
Margaret Hicks
Margaret (t) Snyder
Moya
Pam Garrard
Pat
Ronda Hatch
Ros [Fraser]
S.
Sue [Dixon]

1975
Beryl Henderson
Beth Blom*
Biff [Ward]
Carol Ambrus
Cathy Robertson
Eve Stocker
Fran Smith
Gail Wilenski*
Ginny Ryan
Helen Robertson
Jayne Smith*

1976
Anne Cullen*
Beth Blom*
Biff [Ward]
Elizabeth Allison
Eve [Stocker]
Gwen Ewens
Jayne Smith*
Jenni Shipley
Jill Richards*
Jill Vale*
Kay Johnston
Kay Vernon*
Liz Kentwell*
Margaret Bearlin
Menna Thomas
Meredith Hinchcliffe
Mona
Robyn Walmsley
Sally
Sue Currie
Sue Dixon
Veronica Barbeler
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Capital Women
Cleo
Cosmopolitan
Gay Changes
Gay Community News
Gay Information
Lesbian News
Lesbian Newsletter
Lesbians on the Loose

Lynx Newsletter
Medical Journal of Australia
Meljane
Melbourne Herald
Nation Review
National Times
Out from Under: A Journal of Women and Power
Refractory Girl: A Women’s Studies Journal
Rouge
Scarlet Women
The Australian
The Canberra Times
WEL-ACT and Women’s Liberation Newsletter
Wimminews
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